

PAUL OPPENHEIMER

MACHIAVELLI

A LIFE BEYOND IDEOLOGY



Frontispiece Map



Central Italy, 1494–1598

MACHIAVELLI

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Machiavelli

A Life Beyond Ideology

Paul Oppenheimer



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Contents

List of illustrations	ix
Preface	vi
Introduction: Modern Evil and the Sack of Rome	xiii

I. MACHIAVELLI AND THE CHANGING UNIVERSE

1 Family and Growing Up	3
2 Early Education	11
3 The Cosmic Package	19
4 Poetry, Music and Militarism	25
5 Murder in the <i>Duomo</i>	31
6 A Boyhood Excursion	44
7 The Lost Years	51
8 Poetry and the Medici	62
9 The Religious Revolution	68

II. THE WORLD OF WAR AND DIPLOMACY

10 Executions and an Official Appointment	83
11 Caterina Sforza and the Crisis at Pisa	92

12	The Military Quandary	100
13	On the Move with the French King	106
14	The Long French Patience	117
15	Marriage and a Hint of Cesare Borgia	120
16	Meeting the Captain-General	125
17	Investigating the Sources of Power	133
18	Retribution and Dominance	140
19	Plans to Change the Arno	150
20	The First Journey to Rome	161
21	Cesare's Downfall and the <i>First Decennale</i>	168
22	Anarchy and the Citizen Militia	181
23	The German Enigma	193
24	Victory at Pisa	199
25	A Government Overthrown	205

III. INTO A TUSCAN EXILE

26	The Aftermath of Freedom	221
27	Making History at Sant'Andrea	230
28	Power and Memory	241
29	The Ambush of Love	247
30	Literary Adventures	252
31	Reflecting on the Craft of War	259
32	The Dream of History	267
33	Lights before the Storm	275
34	The Assault on Rome and a Fatal Illness	282

IV. EPILOGUE: THE HISTORICAL AFTERGLOW
293

Notes	299
Bibliography	317
Index	329

List of illustrations

Plates (between pages 198 and 199)

- I. Santi di Tito (1536–1603): Portrait of Machiavelli (author's photo)
- II. Florence c.1480–90 (author's photo collection)
- III. Inside image (1896; neg. 19122) of a room in the Machiavelli *palazzo* (©V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London)
- IV. Duke Federico da Montefeltro and his Son Guido (Bridgeman Art Library)
- V. The Execution of Savonarola (Bridgeman Art Library)
- VI. Portrait of Piero Soderini (Scala/Art Resource NY)
- VII. Portrait of Caterina Sforza (Scala/Art Resource NY)
- VIII. Portrait of Cesare Borgia (Bridgeman Art Library)
- IX. After Leonardo da Vinci (Peter Paul Rubens): The Battle of Anghiari (Bridgeman Art Library)
- X. After Michelangelo (Aristotile da Sangallo): The Battle of Cascina, or Soldiers Bathing (©Collection of the Earl of Leicester; Bridgeman Art Library)
- XI. Albrecht Dürer: The Emperor Maximilian (author's photo)
- XII. Sant'Andrea in Percussina (author's photo)
- XIII. Letter of Machiavelli to his son Guido (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Firenze; lettera autografa, no.53, vol. 1)

Map

Central Italy, 1494–1598 Frontispiece

(Every reasonable effort has been made to credit properly the pictures and other reproductions. Errors should be understood as unintentional and on citation to be corrected in future editions).

Preface

If the Renaissance marks a time when a novel fascination with change, motion and transformation begins to take hold among educated men and women across Europe, Machiavelli stands out as coolly interested in all three. Social transformation fills his pages. Metamorphosis dominates his view of history. War is unpredictable, strategy fragile, goals untenable.

Change can be a ruthless dictator. It trashes promises, reverses griefs and alters the certainty of facts. Theoreticians have their work cut out for them. This biography seeks to evoke the life and discoveries of one of the world's most mesmeric modern theoreticians, who was also a diplomat, philosopher, historian, playwright and poet, and who responded to change with courage, liveliness, enthusiasm and clarity.

It thus fits in with my earlier biography of Peter Paul Rubens, who roughly one hundred years later, in the seventeenth century, came to view beauty as a process. Machiavelli may rank among the first to view society in the same way. Where Rubens sought in his paintings to depict the universality of motion, and so anticipated the discovery of the laws of motion of his contemporary Galileo, whom he may have known, Machiavelli opened an important door on modernity by uncovering patterns of continuous, if not inevitable, social and historical restlessness. The work of the political and military thinker complements that of the artist. Each also owes a good deal to an emerging fashion in self-conscious expression coupled with silent reading. My somewhat earlier book, *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness and the Invention of the Sonnet*, sought to describe its origins in the Italian *duecento*, or the thirteenth century.

Little if anything can be achieved without the generous contributions of others. Gifted scholars and writers have always been drawn to Machiavelli, and I am happy to acknowledge their assistance, both here and in the notes and bibliography. Theirs has been superb company to keep.

I have also been fortunate in my libraries, in New York with the research facilities of the New York Public Library, and at the City University of New York, especially City College and The Graduate Center, and elsewhere, at Princeton and Columbia Universities, and outstandingly in Florence, at the exquisite Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale and the Archivio di Stato di Firenze. Special thanks are due Pamela Gillespie, City College's Chief Librarian, who on occasion came up with all sorts of necessary rescues.

I am infinitely indebted to my editor-publisher Robin Baird-Smith. His astute and patient guidance has fundamentally improved these pages. My gratitude for his professionalism, sensitivity and expertise is great indeed. His assistant, Rhodri Mogford, has likewise proved inestimably helpful.

So have many colleagues and friends, among them Ed Breslin, with numerous suggestions; Fred Reynolds, former Dean of the Arts and Humanities at City College; his successor, Acting Dean Geraldine Murphy; and Josh Wilner, Mark Mirsky, Elizabeth Mazzola, Linsey Abrams, Renata Miller, Harold Veaser, Felicia Bonaparte, Barry Wallenstein, Jack Barschi, David Armstrong, Harry Rolnick, Stella Dong, Simon Sheridan, Anthony Rudolf, Lorenzo Clemente *e la sua moglie*. Federica K. Clementi came up with splendid insights into the diction of Machiavelli's early sonnets, Mariapaola Gritti, my research assistant, with useful information on Renaissance dress and culinary habits. A sabbatical leave, offering me the chance to do my own extended research in Italy and New York, made the work itself possible, and I am grateful to the City University of New York for providing it.

I remain more than grateful to Andras Hamori and William E. Coleman, of Princeton University and The Graduate Center of the City University, who read and checked the typescript, weeding out errors and proposing significant alterations. Their contributions have been of enormous importance, though I cheerfully lay claim to all defects. My son Ben, and his wife Alicia, and my daughter Julie, and her husband Dan, refreshed the months and years with their encouragement. Most of all, my wife Assia kept saving the day every day, reading and raising crucial questions through hours both dark and light, and insisting, when I had my doubts, that the push forward might be worth the candle. To her, as ever, my limitless gratitude, and more.

P.O.
New York, 2011

Introduction: Modern Evil and The Sack of Rome

Machiavelli was the first philosopher to define politics as treachery. This is not to say that he approved of treachery, only that he wished to describe politics as various forms of it. That he set out to do so, however, is no doubt why for almost five hundred years the single most influential of all modern political thinkers, as this biography hopes to show, has himself been described as revolting, nauseating, unprincipled and evil.¹

Many will no doubt have trouble admitting, or having it put to them, that the method according to which they are governed, whether in democracies, republics, monarchies, dictatorships, tribes, communes, bureaucracies or other systems of sovereignty, requires for its perpetuation an unavoidable mixture of hypocrisy and betrayal. Even more may deny that political stability depends on deceit, ambush, violence, murder and lies, or that this is as true of the most decent as of the most indecent governments, that none of them is exempt.

One can, to be sure, disagree with Machiavelli's premise, that all types of government require malfeasance, and utopians, idealists and moralizing others, who prefer to believe that ethics must now and then reign supreme, set out to do so. It is impossible to deny the fascination of the famous Florentine philosopher-playwright's insight, however, or of his piercing and steady attraction because of it. In fact Machiavelli expands on the subject by arguing that there is no reason to be hypocritical about hypocrisy, and so no point in denying the supreme importance of ruthlessness, if not outright evil, in parsing the political relations of human beings: this if anything seems to have been the theme of his life.

It seems also to have formed the atmosphere gathering into the months surrounding his death, which looked to confirm his political convictions in a grotesque display of torture and carnage: the sack of Rome, commencing on 6 May 1527. A yellow fog, thick enough on the ground that morning to hide the movement of Spanish troops through an abandoned Roman house abutting the city's outer wall, camouflaged the footsteps of a horrifying assault. This

was soon to obliterate the remnants of ancient Roman grandeur and the city's medieval magnificence, leaving behind mere ruins of the past and ruins of ruins, in bleak ways marking the end of the Italian Renaissance while ushering in the modern age, a major thrust of the pages to come.²

At the head of an army that appeared formidable even by today's standards, or some 22,000 men, including cavalry, the dashing and clever French Charles, Duc de Bourbon, sported his signature whites and a lush cream-coloured helmet-plume. He had advanced down the Italian peninsula from Milan towards Rome over five months, stirring up a stewpot of grief as he went.³ Slaughter, pillage, the burning of towns and villages, mass rapes, estate-burnings – all accompanied by blackmail, theft, the humiliation of priests and local governments and kidnappings – had left a grisly trail behind his international mishmash of an army. Despite its initial discipline and official loyalty to the Holy Roman Emperor, the Spanish King Charles V, it consisted of competing factions from Germany, the Low Countries (then under Spanish rule), Spain itself, Italy and imperial France. Georg von Frundsberg, the adept and renowned fifty-four-year-old German commander, had contributed 12,000 of his *Landsknechte*, most of them Lutheran. Many were eager for revenge on a Roman papacy viewed as insulting to Christians everywhere for its out-of-control dissipation and corruption.⁴

The fog-beshrouded Roman *campagna*, stretching for miles round the cowering, half-oblivious city, and bathing its turrets in a reflected yellow glow, seemed no less hospitable to the 5,000 Spanish troops under the Marquis of Vasto, Alfonso de Avalos d'Aquino, or the 3,000 Italian under Gian d'Urbino, or the young Prince of Orange riding at the head of his 800 light cavalry, together with an additional 3,500 men bearing 700 lances between them.⁵

Still, no one expected that Rome's walls could be breached with ease, or breached at all. Bourbon himself, according to the contemporary historian Luigi Guicciardini, was by now in charge of a motley gang of soldiers ill-prepared for battle. He had 'arrived at Rome on the fifth of May, 1527, at 5 p.m., with his entire [force], but with such a severe shortage of supplies that he couldn't have lasted two days.' His mercenary soldiers were hungry, enraged at not having been paid and ragged.⁶

The Roman walls themselves, or with greater exactitude, the Aurelian Wall, continued as in ancient times to stretch in more or less good condition over some thirteen miles. It reached an average height of fifty feet, gathering an insolent twelve-foot-thick belt around the ancient rim of the old metropolis.

Until its fall in the fifth century, the city had housed some 2.2 million people. Since then it had seen its population shrink to a mere 53,000. Once all-mighty, but now no longer imposing from a military point of view, it remained in the sheltering luxuriance of the papacy an avaricious army's prize of prizes. Contracted sharply behind its wall, it gleamed with Renaissance churches, cathedrals, libraries, paintings, statuary and new villas for its Popes, as well as the unearthly radiance of the latest Renaissance art. The art included some of the most superb achievements of Michelangelo, Botticelli, Cellini and Raphael. It bespoke a legendary fame, glamour, delicacy and notoriety reminiscent of posh papal feasts on the one hand and orgiastic papal dinner parties on the other.⁷

The wall had just been ordered repaired by the latest Medici Pope, Clement VII, though work on various damaged areas was still unfinished. A domineering defensive structure, especially given the city's reduction in size, it encircled large grassed-over territories, and even villages, beneath which lay buried piles of unexamined treasures, among them parts of Nero's Golden Palace on the Palatine. Crammed in at various points behind the wall hummed a complex beehive of narrow, crowded streets and filthy alleys, though its bastions looked as trim as ever, with 353 hoary towers and 14 lofty, closed gates. Rome seemed as secure within its long-standing protections as amid the glittering robes of its spiritual officials.⁸

The modern viewer's attentiveness to that morning's assault, though, rapidly comes to focus on a single jagged corner of the crenellated battlement, and on just one house ravaged by its single man-high hole. This was swiftly widened by Spanish troops who began to climb and then scramble through it. Astonishment gave way to opportunity. In minutes there spread out before their eyes, untouched and available, if fogged-over and silent, the essence of the Western world's despised if adored, respected, admired and palpable heart.

If Rome's population seemed sizeable by sixteenth-century standards (that of London amounted to 100,000, of Venice 85,000), its available army consisted of a mere 30,000 Roman and foreign troops, plus 3,000 artisans recruited just a few days earlier, most of whom had little interest in fighting. On the other hand, the Spanish troops entering at the deserted house, and hoisting themselves over the wall at Porta Torriane, as von Frundsberg's lansquenets succeeded in doing with scaling ladders near the fort at Santo Spirito, had no notion of the weak forces opposing them.⁹

Fierce resistance sprang up anyway in the quarter known as the Borgo, where the Pope's remaining Swiss Guard held off imperial troops for over an hour.

Their object was to put up a solid defence at the fortress of Castel Sant'Angelo, within which Clement could be expected to take refuge in an emergency, and where, as news of the invasion spread, hundreds of priests, bishops and cardinals, their skirts and capes flapping, began to rush in desperation.¹⁰

Nor had the Spanish assault at Porta Torriane come without its massive shock. Eyewitnesses reported a tense pause, an ominous hesitation before the smudgy apparition of the wall – a bizarre halt in advance of their releasing a suppressed anger into what were to be some of the most outrageous events of the European sixteenth century.

A number of witnesses to what happened were both important in their own right and participants. The twenty-six-year-old Benvenuto Cellini, already recognized as a brilliant gold- and silversmith and sculptor, was in Rome that day. Regarding himself as much a swordsman and soldier as a sculptor, he had set out from Piero del Bene's palace, where he was staying, with Piero's son Alessandro, to reconnoitre the wall at Campo Santo, where Bourbon's army was attempting to break into the city with scores of ladders made of vine poles.

The fog along the path at the top of the wall reduced their visibility to less than six feet. As it cleared for a moment, Cellini, Alessandro and two other men who joined up with them came across the bodies of several soldiers shot dead by the invaders. Cellini suggested that they pull back as there was 'nothing to be done ... you see the enemies are mounting and our men are in flight.' When Alessandro panicked, however, and started to shout, Cellini changed his mind, at once intent on performing 'some action worthy of a man,' or at least inspiring his friend, and raised his arquebus, the primitive, single-round Renaissance musket usually incapable of much accuracy, telling the others to take aim as well.¹¹

What followed, amid the flurry of the couple of shots each that they fired, remains a matter of dispute. It seems clear that the Duke of Bourbon, with his helmet and plume visible through the ranks of his men attempting to raise and climb the ladders, was hit at least once and fell back.

What is unclear is whether Cellini fired the crucial round. He himself makes no such claim, simply noting that 'one of our shots killed the Constable of Bourbon,' who remained alive for some seconds, or long enough to exhort his men with the selflessness and concern expected of a Renaissance nobleman: 'Cover me up, soldiers, so the enemy doesn't find out about my death, and get on with the battle, courageously. My death must not deprive you of so sure and hard-won a victory.'¹² Moved and thrilled, if grieving, those nearest him

resumed the attack. In minutes, tens of thousands of soldiers swept cheering, shooting and slashing over the wall, and began to surge in a cascade through the streets beyond.

With Bourbon's leaderless army hot on their heels, Cellini and his friends raced into the Castel Sant'Angelo. There he was speedily placed under the command of Giuglio Ferrara, who had taken over the sole artillery battery. Cellini spent the day, and well into the night, helping to supervise and reload a battery of cannon while directing their angles of fire at the foreign troops attempting to establish a siege around the ancient Roman fortress, which soon drew over three thousand refugees behind its turrets. Pope Clement himself, as Cellini discovered, had made it in only with difficulty, puffing along the exposed gallery that connected the castle with the Vatican, as Cardinal Pompeo Colonna tossed a monsignore's violet cloak and cap over his bulk to hide him from the soldiers below, who would have shot him on sight.¹³

Meanwhile, out in the streets, a macabre spectacle presented itself: a terrified army pursued by gangs of killers, and with both surging among vivid new works of art depicting a bygone and obsolete heroism: scores of paintings of scenes extracted from ancient legends and Greek myths and over the previous couple of years painted onto the facades of the most expensive Roman mansions: Horatius Cocles and Mucius Scaevola saving Rome centuries earlier through deeds of soldierly defiance, Perseus turning his enemies to stone by flashing the decapitated head of Medusa into their eyes, Hercules strutting his muscular arrogance through his twelve labours: the ennobled past seemed devoid of meaning amid the wave of vulgar modern obliteration.¹⁴

The sack proper did not get underway till Tuesday, 7 May, even if on the first day some 8,000 people, or almost one sixth of the population, were murdered. The *tuffo*, or orange-red stone, volcanic in origin, and forming the base of Rome's famed Seven Hills, picked up splashes of crimson as thirteen cardinals, one of them heaved up in a basket, scooted behind Ferrara's defensive artillery at the Castel Sant'Angelo.

Fires broke out in Rome's *piazze*. The great houses shook as their doors were torn off their hinges. The owners had fled. Within days, a pike had carved Luther's name into one of Raphael's frescoes at the Vatican. A city-wide smashing-up began, of bells, chalices, candlesticks, holy relics, clocks, religious paintings – with everything mangled, shredded, pulverized. The gem-studded vestments of the priests, found in the churches and pried free of their precious stones, were turned over to prostitutes for their daily use.¹⁵

The unrestrained soldiers raped scores of nuns, bartering for them with each other on rolls of dice. Soldiers took a humiliating pleasure in stripping the clerics, pummelling them into holding black masses, jeering at them for doing so and then chopping off their fingers for their rings. The poor were murdered because they had no money, the rich kidnapped and held for ransom. A helpless businessman, unable to cough up enough ready cash, was roped to a tree and tortured by ripping off one of his fingernails per day till he died.¹⁶

Amid the rioting, the stench of corpses left rotting in the streets and alleys, the smell of uncollected sewage, the defecation and urine, the frazzled clothes, knifed tapestries and broken furniture, and in days the deadly spreading of typhus and other diseases, the cries and lamentations, it seems doubtful that the killers, not to mention the Romans themselves, were aware of pouring through a glass membrane of history separating one era from another, of crossing a rare and significant boundary of the historical world.

Some, among them a few thoughtful artists such as Giuglio Clovio and Sebastiano del Polombo, who fled and survived but never painted in the same way again – either with their previous confidence in a world of secure relations, or even in the possibility of a compassionate community of people – may have divined the outline of a stark new shadow. It seemed to indicate the transition from one type of light, or illumination, to another, and the city's descent into a peculiar sort of darkness. A few Romans may have guessed.¹⁷

What seems clear enough is that prophecies, including at least one by Machiavelli himself, abounded, each foretelling a disaster that, as the English King Henry VIII wrote to one Cardinal Cibo a few weeks later, on 10 July, must be regarded as the world's most 'criminal' of acts: 'that those who had once been pledged to the Christian religion should exert themselves to destroy her.'

An eye-witness, Pierio Valeriano (1477–1558?), who knew Rome both before and after the sack, recalls in his bitter dialogue *il Contarenus sive de Litteratorum infelicitate* (*The Misfortunes of Writers*, published in 1529) how the droves of murders, and, over many days, suicides, blotted out the complex aspirations of the Renaissance. Not only artistic but literary life, along with multitudes of Roman authors, simply vanished into the slaughter and uproar.¹⁸ Valeriano reports that though traces of literary culture survived, Latin never quite regained its previous prominence. The decline of classical Greek, already in progress despite the setting up of a Greek printing press in 1499 by Giovanni de' Medici, who was to become Pope Leo X, seemed guaranteed.

Luigi Guicciardini blamed the universal destruction on those venal

‘ecclesiastical rulers’ and other Italians who ‘persist in effeminate and abominable vices,’ by which he meant homosexual and other forms of illicit sex, on Rome’s ‘ignorance’ of foreign malice growing without restraint over the previous thirty years, and on ‘the wrath of God’: ‘Consider how small a number of foreigners fearlessly ranges through our miserable Italy every day, assaulting our cities, taking them with ease, sacking them without mercy and with little cost to themselves, then occupying them in happiness and security as long as it suits them. Certainly we should be ashamed of our cowardice and our failure to resist.’¹⁹

Whether incited by Roman helplessness or more selfish motives, a popular Sienese religious fanatic, Brandano, whose reddish skin, blowsy red hair and skeletal appearance lent him an aura of defiant doom, had confronted Clement VII before Saint Peter’s on Holy Thursday, or 18 April.

Half-naked, but calling out to the crowd assembled to hear the Pope offer his traditional blessing, swinging from the statue of Saint Paul, Brandano had taunted Clement as the ‘bastard of Sodom,’ and proclaimed that ‘for thy sins Rome shall be destroyed. Repent and turn thee! If thou wilt not believe me, in fourteen days thou shalt see it!’

Clement had ordered his arrest, but incarceration did nothing to stem the wave of hideous pronouncements that gushed out of his prison cell, or the spreading popular conviction that he must have foreknowledge of some impending and macabre Roman calamity. To Guicciardini and many Romans, the perilous atmosphere seemed confirmed by other portents: a mule that gave birth in the Cancelleria, the collapse of chunks of the Aurelian Wall connecting the papal palace with Castel Sant’Angelo, ‘a lightning bolt [that lifted] the Infant from the arms of a highly revered statue of Our Lady in the Church of S. Maria in Trastevere,’ with the result that the figure of the holy Child was broken and Mary’s crown shattered, a Eucharistic wafer mysteriously ‘thrown to the ground’ in the pope’s chapel – each of these, as the superstitious chronicler noted, ‘strong signs that might reasonably frighten any Christian.’²⁰

The persistence of omens and prophecies also remains revealing not merely as a guide to the general tenor of the times but as a modern spotlight exposing some of the chief struggles of Machiavelli’s life. During the terror, as among the centuries before and after it, belief in omens, prophecies, witchcraft, demons, ghosts, magic, astrology, necromancy and miracles (or God’s interference in nature) disturbed most European brains. Any trust in rational and empirical investigations, though common enough among merchants, architects, farmers,

lawyers and weavers as they engaged in their trades, seemed abandoned once they turned their attention to politics, love, disease and war, or just about anything else.

In the twentieth century Adolf Hitler, an enthusiastic reader of Machiavelli, is reported to have consulted astrologers before launching his armies on *Blitzkrieg* invasions. If Napoleon cared little for prophecy, he too read Machiavelli, though perhaps as a rational nostrum, as did philosophers such as Hegel and Fichte, and Cardinal Richelieu, Queen Christina of Sweden, the leaders of the Italian *Risorgimento*, Frederick the Great, Bismarck, Mussolini, Clemenceau, Lenin and Stalin. Most Renaissance commanders sought out star-gazers as a matter of course: Bourbon huddled with his personal astrologers before cancelling his truce with Clement VII, on 28 March 1527, after which he decamped to the south to carry out his attack on Rome. Not much later, Clement remarked, 'I well deserve any calamity that might befall me.'²¹

In the German north, Martin Luther prophesied, on grounds of religious corruption, a savage end to what he viewed as Roman dissipation. In Florence, and later in other Italian cities to which he was sent as a diplomat after years of painful civic exile, Machiavelli provided a more restrained forecast. It seemed typical of his age-defying empirical style of analysis, though it was expressed in the conventional terms of religious prophecy, and had more to do with the possibility of a papal military defeat along the entire length of the Italian peninsula.

As early as November 1526, he found himself writing to Francesco Guicciardini, a well-known lawyer and future Italian historian, the papal governor of Piacenza and other towns, the brother of Luigi, and his own friend, that he

remained in Modena for two days and talked with a prophet who maintained, with witnesses, that he had predicted the pope's flight and the [military] campaign's futility; and again he says that all the bad times are not yet over – both we and the [P]ope will suffer greatly during them.²²

On 16 April 1527, he confided to his more intimate friend Francesco Vettori, this time during a stay in Forlì:

I love my native city [Florence] more than my own soul; and I tell you as a result of the experience I have had over sixty years that I do not believe there were ever more

difficult problems than these [having to do with Bourbon's invading army], where peace is necessary and war cannot be renounced, and where we have a prince [Pope Clement VII] on our hands who can barely meet the needs of either peace by itself or war by itself.²³

Actually, Machiavelli was not sixty but fifty-eight as he scribbled these apprehensive lines, perhaps exaggerating his age for effect as was sometimes his way, even if he seemed frailer than usual and may have been sinking into one of his miserable bouts with the recurring peritonitis for which he had been taking aloe pills over several months. The pills provided a pernicious medical treatment that, along with the illness itself, may have exhausted and killed him at home in his native city on 21 June, just six weeks after the tragedy in the south.

It may thus be understood that he cannot have been altogether surprised by the grim events in Rome. This probability seems likely, even if speculation is to be shunned in a biography intended to let him step forward into his own world on his own terms – or with his severe yet hardy presence pitted not so much into his times as against them, and with the contradictions of his life expressed as openly as the invasion racing through the Roman streets in early May.

In each of his books, and not just in his paradoxical if still unpublished masterpiece *The Prince*, he had predicted the downfall of any political state which lacked three crucial elements: a defensive army consisting of its own citizens rather than mercenaries, a leader more dreaded than loved, but above all respected, and a foundation in organized religion, or at least in spiritual values.

His premise throughout had been military, civil and spiritual reliability and not the unique qualities of the soldiers, leader or values. Nor had he argued for their flawlessness: soldiers, leaders and spirituality might each be wobbly, or as many as two of the three might be. If they were present, the state might still survive.

The sticking place had been that without some streak of naïve trust, the essential political instrument of treachery could not be brought into play. No survival at all without deceit, he had argued, drawing his conclusion from a heap of evidence both ancient and modern. No state could muddle through without its opportunities for betrayal.

The Prince itself, which was to appear in print only five years later, in 1532, well after his death, but whose circulation in manuscript copies had already

established his reputation as an advocate of evil and murder for the sake of power, had itself been composed in a treacherous milieu of social anarchy. This point needs stressing because of a curious difference between the social worlds in which most political thinkers ever since have done their work and that in which he did so. Nearly all have beavered away amid fairly peaceful societies, while he was forced to seek out rare islands of contemplation amid a sea of blustery disorders.

Hume, Hobbes, Locke, Jefferson, the sixteenth-century Jean Bodin, Franklin, Hamilton, Acton, Burke, Danton, Robespierre, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Engels, Jaurès (the eloquent French socialist leader, dying on the eve of the World War that he denied could take place because it would be contrary to the class interests of working people), along with lesser political (if enthralling psychological) thinkers such as Max Weber and Freud, had emerged from stable, and in the case of Karl Marx, well-policed environments. Often their insights saw the public light of day before their creators found themselves confronted by social and military catastrophes.

For Machiavelli the situation seemed reversed. His political reflections apparently coalesced only after he was dismissed from a long-held government advisory post. As he began writing *The Prince* in 1512, his social and political surroundings, once firm-seeming and richly appointed, descended into a shambles. Riots, battles, random killings, assassinations, sieges, abductions – all stormed almost at his elbow as he tried to make his way with his typical careful haste through the knotty strategic problems of princely power, as well as his *Discourses*, his *Art of War* and his *Florentine Histories*. If he concentrated on connections between politics and slaughter as he wrote, he did so not simply because they fascinated him but because he could see their relationship wherever he looked.

Italy itself, as he knew at first hand, was a land ‘vanquished, despoiled, torn, devastated’ – or sick and ailing, as he described it in his letters, an ill-compacted group of city states not so much impoverished as unceasingly plundered.²⁴ As a result, and from a grotesquely positive point of view, but one fundamental to the correctness of his insights because Italian society offered such cruel contrasts in education, wealth, poverty, security and depravity, his own culture seemed an ideal if unusual laboratory in which to study politics in the raw, so to speak, or politics without ideology.

But can such a condition have existed? An assumption of some historians is that any chance of a social and psychological breakdown so complete

that people can lead lives, no matter how jumbled, without any ideology, or governing system of beliefs, is unimaginable. Politics, history and by extension the most delicate aspects of human behaviour are viewed as regulated by attitudes, or a mix of ideologies, or so-called 'unstable' ideologies, with the latter teetering towards breakdown and replacement because subject to batterings by conscious and unconscious social forces.²⁵

But *no* ideologies? Everyone, it is argued, can no more escape the influence of at least implicit systems of ideas, or set-in-place ideological systems, than he or she can live outside societies governed by laws and rules: systems of belief and values reign everywhere over human lives, doing so with unerring determinism.²⁶

In response, it should be noted that this claim seems to make no logical sense, or that it may as formulated have no meaning. The reason, as Karl Popper (*b.*1902) long ago demonstrated, is that no proposition can properly be understood as either meaningful or even comprehensible unless its opposite, or its falsifiability, is also conceivable. The assertion that ideologies are ubiquitous thus seems as self-contradictory as proposing that absolute truths cannot exist. It is equivalent to maintaining that sickness is universal, and so finding oneself unable to distinguish between sickness and health and unable to define either. While this sort of confusion may have gained acceptance in certain academic circles, it should be understood that, as will be seen, Machiavelli would have rejected it.²⁷

Problems of trust, truth and reliability nonetheless remained challenges whose resolution he repeatedly sought. As a result, any new biography of him, beyond its attempt to paint his life in vital colours, and so to allow readers to see, feel, smell, taste and listen to his world as well as hear his voice with, it may be hoped, relatively fine tuning, ought to supply a comprehensive view of his intellectual adventures while relying on the superb work of earlier scholars. At a minimum it should promote an understanding of him as the first thinker to investigate incessant political change combined with political treachery. As he began to uncover the roles of each in the conduct of political states, and the influence of the irrational on both, his nuggety phrases, a bit like the chunks of some precious ore, began to shine forth as well, illuminating his conclusions.

Curiosity provoked style. Frustration invested awareness. Each induced his constant reconsideration of the irrational, together with its power to seduce, as keys to historical clarity. Each seemed abetted by encounters with his own

contradictions, and this centuries before the Romantics and their successors in the social sciences began to move down parallel tracks.

In the meantime, in June 1527, Clement VII surrendered and was permitted to seek refuge in Citavecchia, though dozens of his prelates remained prisoners in the wrecked urban encampment that now surrounded the Castel Sant'Angelo, and in the darkness that had fallen inside the fortress itself, among whose disordered rooms hundreds lay sick and dying.²⁸

In the company of Francesco Guicciardini, Machiavelli visited Orvieto, where he first learned of the circumstances of the sack and met frightened survivors, to whom he gave assistance. At the suggestion of Guicciardini, the Florentine city council sent him on to Citavecchia as well, by 22 May. The town had become the headquarters of Andrea Doria, the commander of the French fleet drawn up against the Spanish Charles V.²⁹

The threat of Machiavelli's illness remained unknown to him, as did his future, which was not to provide him with more than a few additional weeks of life. He seems to have been unaware of his dilemma, however, as he returned home on horseback, assuming only that with Florence once again a republic, following on the flight of the Medici, he might be able to take up a position in the new government.

This was not to be. An appropriate post went to another former official, as had happened before and as his illness closed in.³⁰ If in late June he was buried in the Gothic Santa Croce church, where his pre-eminent mentor in poetry, if less so in political theory, Dante, was interred and where in 1564 his acquaintance Michelangelo would also be laid to rest, his last days were accompanied by the hushed drumbeat of the slight though definite renown that had come his way. It had little to do with politics. In the political world only his *Art of War* had brought him much real recognition. The wider notice had to do with his brilliant sex-comedy *Mandragola*, with which modern comedy if not modern theatre may be said to begin, and whose resonant theme is also treachery, if of the domestic type. His play had earned him an agreeable rush of applause, and run through a number of productions.

In the end he seems to have been amused by the paradox that while his ambition for political success had produced no genuine rewards, or so he wrongly guessed, his gamble on a career as a playwright had led to a muted glory.

In the end, too, the paradox seems appropriate to his appearance: his twisty nose, his gaunt, recessive cheeks, the hint of passionate mischief cast over

his rumpled features and especially the smooth regard of his eyes. In the few nearly contemporary portraits that survive, a faint polish suffuses his tawny complexion: no hint of rawness, ruthlessness or injustice – just his remarkable precision, his wit, his often bawdy good humour and the gloss of a patient, triumphant irony.

I

Machiavelli and the Changing Universe

Family and Growing Up

The mystery of his life begins in 1469, with his birth into a family of down-at-heels Florentine prominence, if not nobility. A yearning to belong to the nobility, or even to some decayed and irrelevant noble family, coupled with the likelihood that there may have existed genuine links between the Machiavelli family and the ruling lords of Montespertoli, a wisp of a hamlet 33 kilometres southwest of Florence. To satisfy it meant reaching back a few centuries, and it seems to have rippled with shabby eagerness through the Machiavellis' daily life. Powerlessness ached for extravagance. Respectability seemed to slip through their fingers.

Bernardo, Niccolò's father, and himself a lawyer, though oddly without any practice to speak of, took pride in tracing his family's lineage in Montespertoli back to 1120, with a definite glance farther back, to 1040. According to a fourteenth-century contested will, the Machiavelli line had mingled with that of the insignificant lords of Castellani, as they were called, on the death of Ciango d'Agnolo of the Castellani, in 1393.¹ Even earlier, and on the Machiavellis' side, or so Bernardo was convinced, the family's ancestry extended as far back as one Malchiavello, who had lived in Montespertoli in 1040. The Castellani, whose castle, together with their seigniorial rights in and around Montespertoli, came to be at issue with the Machiavelli during a court hearing over the will of Ciango's father, traced their own lineage back to one Dono Machiavelli and his son Buoninsegna, who could himself be traced to 1120.²

When, as followed on the Machiavelli winning their adjudication over Agniolo de Castellani's will in 1426–7, they assumed title to somewhat less than half the Castellani estates, they also assumed a part share of the rest of the Castellani legacy. The greater portion continued to be held by the Parte Guelpha, or, loosely, the Tuscan citizens bloc of the day. The Machiavellis' chief benefit from this adjudication seems to have been trivial: they were permitted to display their coat of arms, but only discreetly, on Montespertoli buildings, including churches and the local castle.

An appropriate inference is that the common descent of the Machiavelli and the lords of Castellani remains a shaky proposition, more so than Bernardo Machiavelli's enthusiasm for it. A strained aristocratic connection provided still less than before in the way of income and rights by the time Niccolò Machiavelli was born, with the latter consisting of the right to control the public scales and commercial measures in Montespertoli, plus an opportunity to exhibit the Machiavelli coat of arms over a well in the marketplace. The rest of the Castellani property, including the castle, had decades before been divided and dispersed among the rival branches of the two families. In the Machiavellis' case, at least, grasping at noble connections implied picking about among failed fantasies.³

Far surer, though not without its own implications of strain and even shadings of terror, was the Machiavelli link with Girolamo d'Agnolo Machiavelli (1415–60), one of Niccolò Machiavelli's more intimate ancestors: he belonged to the parallel Lorenzo branch of the family and was Bernardo's second cousin, a professor of both genuine renown and scandalous notoriety.

Girolamo had taught law at the University of Florence between 1435 and 1440, where it is to be supposed that Bernardo, Niccolò Machiavelli's father, had studied for his own law degree, possibly during the same years.

In the late 1450s, Girolamo began to profess defiant anti-Medici sentiments precisely at a time when speaking out against Florence's leading, most powerful and often ruthless family could have lethal consequences. As a significant member of an anti-Medici political group and known legal expert, and potentially dangerous to the government by virtue of his academic authority, Girolamo was arrested on 3 August 1458 and denounced for repudiating as corrupt several Medici economic policies as well as demanding the restoration of citizens' rights to criticize, or freedom of speech.

As was customary, he was at first tortured, and was then sentenced to banishment in Avignon for a period of ten years. It should probably be noted that for its disgrace alone, banishment in Renaissance Florence, as in ancient Athens, was regarded as a fate worse than death. His brothers, Piero and Francesco d'Agnolo, along with other members of the group, were likewise arrested and banished. Francesco was dispatched to Florence's feared municipal prison, built in 1299, and known as the *Stinche*, or dungeons, since 1302. He was beheaded at the *Stinche* in 1459. Girolamo fared little better. He tried to flee but was seized at Lunigiana, near the mouth of the River Magra, not far from Pisa.

Accused of forming a criminal conspiracy aimed at the Medici, he too was consigned to the Stinche, where he met his death, apparently by strangulation, in 1460 – leaving behind an extensive legal library, unusual for a period just prior to the introduction of the printing press in Florence, when purchasing even the least important manuscript books was expensive. The library, along with the rest of his property, was confiscated, depriving his wife and small son of a potentially substantial inheritance. His true legacy, however, may have been a ghostly influence on the life of the young Niccolò, with a suggestive effect on his future that today may only be surmised.⁴

On the other hand, Girolamo was by no means the only Machiavelli to attract much public attention, whether distasteful or estimable, in Florentine political circles. Several of his cousins, among them Alessandro Filippo Machiavelli, attained posts in city government, doing so despite Girolamo's abasement and ill repute, which could then have led to their rejection.

Notable along these lines was his cousin Paolo di Giovanni Machiavelli, elected to the ruling *balìa*, or municipal authority, in 1466, 1471 and 1480. Paolo was even elected *Gonfaloniere di giustizia*, or Standard-Bearer of Justice, or head of state, for two months in 1478, and accepted a top appointment in the Florentine navy (as a republican city state including many smaller cities and towns, Florence maintained a navy), serving as a *Capitano* in Pisa in 1483, and Livorno in 1488.

Not even these accomplishments added up to the family's whole political story, if only because it seems clear that suspect, rebellious influences shadowed Niccolò's early life from the start. In 1458, to cite a pertinent instance, his father, Bernardo, married into the Benizzi family, everywhere understood as anti-Medici. Girolamo's brother Piero had married into the same family, whose house was located more or less across the street from Bernardo's. He and three of his brothers were exiled with Girolamo in that ominous year for so many of them, 1458, or twelve years before Niccolò's birth.

Another Benizzi brother, Matteo di Piero, had also been sentenced to exile some twenty years earlier by the Medici on their return to Florence from their own period of exile in 1434. With Niccolò Machiavelli's mother, Bartholomea, a young (and recently widowed; she had been married before) sister-in-law of five brothers exiled for political reasons, residing in the house where he was born and grew up, it seems inconceivable, though little is rock-solid here, that Niccolò did not drink in giddy tales of defiant struggle, futility, torture and courage with, so to speak, his mother's milk.⁵

Even the Machiavelli house, it appears, reflected stifled yearnings after defeated prominence. Located in Florence at the equivalent of 16 Via Guicciardini (today the Via Romana), it was an imposing-looking if modest-sized four-storey affair, one of a group of linked buildings, and perhaps former towers, and so in the fashion of the day termed a *palazzo*, on the south bank of the Arno, almost at the entrance to the Ponte Vecchio, the oldest of the city's bridges, dating to 1345 and built with its neat rows of shops lining each side of a narrow crossing road: it resembled only superficially the messy exhilaration of silver- and goldsmiths' shops to be seen there today.

Just past the bridge and across from a small *piazza* called Santa Felicità, with its unassuming church free-standing in its bare elegance (minus its famous Vasari passageway, which would be erected only in the century to come), the Machiavellis' *palazzo* was politically positioned, it appears, in the Oltrarno neighborhood, where many Guelph families settled on returning from exile after their defeat by the Ghibellines in 1260. The families soon began to play vital roles in government, or as with the Machiavelli, to provide the city with over fifty government officials by the time Niccolò was born on 3 May 1469.⁶

Bernardo and his wife Bartholomea were about 42 and 31 respectively by then, Niccolò's two sisters, Primavera and Margherita, five and two; a brother, Totto, was born in 1475, when Niccolò was six. Surviving and revealing photographs of a destroyed, nineteenth-century model of a portion of one of the rooms of the house, most likely the large, ornate second-storey chamber used for dining and family amusements, are helpful, when compared, as here for the first time, with what is known about similar *palazzi*, in understanding the aspirations and domestic atmosphere in which Niccolò first came to know his world.

Two black and white pictures of the model (plate III), taken c.1898, show part of a wall, a ceiling and a door, each resplendent with an upper-class, sophisticated Florentine poshness. The wall, impressively, was frescoed by a Florentine master, Benozzo Gozzoli (1421/22-*d.* Pistoia 1497), most likely at the start of his career, which means that Niccolò would surely have known it in childhood. Benozzo was to collaborate with Fra Angelico on Pope Nicolas V's chapel in the Vatican, assist Ghiberti in the execution of the second door of his amazing baptistry, and later make spectacular contributions of other frescoes to the family chapel in the Medici palace.

Additional painting, of a frieze running above both door and wall, by an unknown artist, presents correspondingly extravagant work in the form of lush

fruit trees. The lintels and the door jamb are done in the exquisite *pietra serena* style of gray sandstone indigenous to Tuscany. The door, in intarsia, an inlaid strips-of-wood method that arranges various hues side by side, complements the frieze. The ceiling's single beam (only one is shown) is delicately painted in repeated floral bunches. On the beam appears one of the three Machiavelli coats of arms: four long blue nails, each piercing a different central corner of a blue cross set into a white background.⁷

If little else is known about the interior of this one house of the several making up the Machiavelli *palazzo* – the house itself was deliberately destroyed by explosives in August 1944, during the German retreat north towards the end of the Second World War – the room's aura of Renaissance *élan*, interleaving an imaginative use of colour with a strong aesthetic sensibility and lingering hints of power and money, may be acknowledged as flattering their aristocratic ambience.

Its smart *décor* seems to elaborate the fact that both house and *palazzo*, or a siamese linking of buildings, had been owned by the Machiavelli family since the mid-fourteenth century, or for more than a hundred years by the time Niccolò was born. This was also the case with Bernardo's inherited small country estates and their steep farmland unfolding over fleecy, green-in-summer hills ten miles south of Florence, beyond the massive city gate today called the Porta Romana, though at the time the San Pietro Gattolino.⁸

If, as a boy wandering into the central room of the family's main house, Niccolò gazed up at the coat of arms, he no doubt understood, especially on growing older and beginning to wander through and explore his city, that his family's somewhat old-fashioned type of *palazzo* differed dramatically from the newer and more muscular ones being built or recently completed for far more powerful and wealthy families such as the Medici and Pitti.

Their city-block-sized, aggressive flaunting, combined with a placidity and a solid assertion of strapping financial and political dominance, outshone if not dismissed the medieval quaintness of the jumbled though not inconsiderable buildings in which he came to play, read and sleep. All of them harked back with a friendly collegiality to earlier, rural days in farming villages.

The house itself, for instance, still contained the old, rural, vaulted hall on its ground floor. Among urban families practising a trade – not the Machiavelli – this lower area would now have been used for work or as a shop. Casks of wine, as many as six fat standing ones of red alone, were kept there for coolness and easy access. They stood alongside bins and barrels for flax, olive oil, rye and

wheat, perhaps meant as money-savers culled from Bernardo's two farms near his estate villa, or *albergaccio*, in Sant'Andrea in Percussina, the village among the hills south of the city. This villa was accessible on foot or by mule-drawn cart past the high Florentine walls with their gnarled battlements and the two enormous iron doors of each of the city gates, drawn shut at night and presided over by armed guards.

The second floor, containing the single room depicted in the destroyed model, would surely have been reserved for family life, or eating, bickering, washing up in traditional broad basins and relaxing. In similar houses this long room was often partitioned, as were the rooms in the upper storeys. The top storey was often set aside as the kitchen, allowing its fireplace and chimney, under the roof, to usher cooking smells and smoke into the street. As with similar houses, too, the windows were criss-crossed with stout bars against burglars, though mostly to keep the women from sneaking out.⁹

In his valuable if choppy and irregularly kept journal, or book of *ricordi* of memorable events, maintained from 1474, when Niccolò was five, to 1487, and which survives in the Florentine Biblioteca Riccardiana, Bernardo describes how his nephew-once-removed, Niccolò d'Alessandro, who headed another of the group of Machiavelli families residing at the *palazzo*, managed to squirm through the unbarred top-storey window next to the kitchen fireplace (*focolare di cucina*) to carry on with one of the servant girls: her own window, on a lower floor, had impassable bars.¹⁰

Along social and sexual lines as well, and for the sake of illuminating a bit of the bustle around the Machiavelli hearth and *palazzo*, it may be added that if local custom was followed, there would have been more than just a couple of servants: a serving woman, for instance, occupied a two-room apartment on the ground floor. The reason was that Florence was tricked out not only with servant women but slaves. It was ebulliently if miserably slave-garlanded, and some twelve to thirty per cent of all births registered in and around the city, even as far back as the fourteenth century, consisted of children born to slave mothers.

Slavery was legal, though it lacked all basis in race or religion, at least according to the official lists. The municipal legalization of slavery had begun in 1336, after the decimation of the servant as well as the general population following fierce outbreaks of the plague. Slaves were acquired from among the Tartars, Greeks, Russians, Turks, Circassians, Bosnians, Slavs, Cretans and even Moslems, though most were Christian. In Niccolò's day they were frequently

imported. Younger slaves were deemed more valuable than older ones, girls more than boys.¹¹

Slaves' clothing styles, as to a great extent the styles of others, were strictly controlled according to the prevailing sumptuary laws, vehemently but variously implemented straight across Europe. In Florence, these laws, whose purpose was to maintain class hierarchy by suppressing self-importance and arrogance through the purchase of luxurious, class-dismissive fashions, prevented female slaves as well as other servants from wearing *pianelle*, or high-heeled shoes of a flashy type then popular, or trains affixed to dresses or gowns, or bright, seductive colours.

While quite a few people, including indentured servants, sometimes flouted sumptuary laws, and with impunity, by, say, sporting a fur coat or gold earrings, slaves ran risks of beatings and imprisonment.¹²

Vicious beatings in any case, or slappings, kickings and punchings, together with buffeting spats and worse eruptions of violence, going as far as slaves poisoning their masters and vice versa, were not infrequent in Florence's crowded houses and *palazzi*, in which servants, slaves and groups of families such as the Machiavelli resided together in conjoined buildings.

Since ancient Roman and earlier Etruscan times, torture had been a built-in part of life. A not unfamiliar spectacle during Niccolò Machiavelli's boyhood was the public staging of city-authorized displays of drastic punishments, such as that which had taken place as long ago as 20 August 1379, of a female slave found guilty of poisoning her master with silver nitrate introduced into his enema. Sentenced to death, she was lugged through the streets in a cart as crowds looked on and as her skin was pried off with hot pincers, till arriving at the *piazza* designated for her execution, she was roasted alive.¹³

As Niccolò inspected the family coat of arms in the room lusciously frescoed by Benozzo Gozzoli, he may have found himself, like many other children and nearly everyone else, understanding quite a bit about the ambiguities and contradictions of domestic art and militaristic power, having seen them in action from a young age and witnessed their clashing and complementary absoluteness. As much was to be found in this not atypical specimen of fourteenth-century advice to housewives by one Fra Bernardino, a roving Sienese priest:

If you don't get her used to doing all the work, she will become a little lump of flesh. Don't give her any time off, I tell you. As long as you keep her on the go, she won't waste her time leaning out of the window.¹⁴

If, as also happened, slaves were on occasion allowed to feel that they had become veritable members of their owners' families, among noble families or families with aristocratic pretensions their future remained unpredictable, though unpredictability could itself produce extraordinary compassion.

Alessandra Macinghis (?1407–71), from a family of successful merchants and marrying into the wealthy Strozzi, recorded with lugubrious commiseration the death of a slave alongside that of a neighbour, while describing the grim advance of Florentine poverty and plague in a letter of 2 November 1465, or just a few years before Niccolò's birth:

It's been a hard year for poor men, and there's plague as well; several people have died of it in the last few days... . In Rimieri da Ricasoli's house his mother died of it, and then a slave and an illegitimate daughter... . So it is beginning, and it is winter. God help us.¹⁵

As Alessandra intimates, most of Florence's 45,000 people in the late fourteenth century, or throughout Niccolò's boyhood, even if they were not devout Christians and were perhaps persuaded of the dissipation and frivolity of their priests, saw their God as worried about slaves and others. They were convinced that divine justice existed for everyone.

Informed people – the majority – were also persuaded that they lived in an advanced republic. Though people today might not regard a slave society practising torture as progressive, governing committees and limited voting had long since been well established.

Early Education

Niccolò's education, which started at the then usual age of seven, or perhaps the year before, and involved a series of tutors selected by his father, focused on politics, history, grammar and literary style. This approach was in no way eccentric. Among the more than one quarter of Florentine boys formally educated after the 1470s (unless girls came from noble families, they were unlikely to be taught outside the protection of their homes), most learned Latin, together with these and vocational subjects, such as accounting. For Latin they used a grammar book over a thousand years old, the *Donatello* (or as Bernardo termed it in his Tuscan dialect, the *Donadello*), or *Ars minor*, by Aelius Donatus.¹ Teaching, as elsewhere in Europe with this or a similar book, consisted of memorization through repetition, or for many, tedium leading into annoyance.

Here may be why, before considering any of the unquestionable advantages of Niccolò's way of learning, it seems necessary, especially if one wishes to understand its valuable influence on him, its strengths and even its beneficial intellectual and emotional results, to take account of two apparently unrelated phenomena: Florence's ivory and gold lights on his early tutorial mornings, which remain visible to this day, and the city's morning swallows, small, beautiful, unusual and also still to be seen.

Niccolò would have been sent off to school during the just-after-dawn hours (schools and schooling started early: his first tutorial visits began on 6 May 1476), as the sun bisected the claret-clear Florentine sky with its memorable, acute light. The rays shooting along the streets seemed brush strokes profiling the day. They matched in growing warmth his fascinated affection with the many passageways and high walls, and this with a mesmerized interest, it now seems evident, that must have increased over time. The city was a developing work of art, through whose cobblestoned *piazze*, with his noted irony perhaps flickering in his eyes even then, he moved in an awareness that he came from

an old Florentine family whose history amid the scene spreading before him may have led into scepticism about his approaching schoolboy routine, possibly distracting him from any lasting commitment to scholarship.

For then as now the wild flocks of the city's swallows swarmed in their untidy and twisting bands, fluting, diving, soaring by their hundreds, unique to the place and even this part of central Italy. They looped at the centuries-old high watch towers, and at Giotto's *campanile*, which he had never seen finished beyond its second storey, with its ribbons of pink, green and white marble abutting Brunelleschi's *Duomo*, itself complete except for its entrance façade. The majestic eight-sided dome was just fifty years old and so relatively new. The swallows dashed through the morning's ivory lights. Their shifting dives curled past the Santa Felicità, just across from the windows of the family *palazzo*. They seemed to ignite the five o'clock dark and six o'clock shop-stirring, unless a rare summer rain had begun to fall.

By seven, though, and regardless of the weather, the Ponte Vecchio's shops would have opened, and the scattered *piazze*, fed by the night-freshened streets, began to breathe and whisper. Their activity mingled with his schooltime. They rose beside ground-in smells trundled in from the nearby farms, from the earth, from chunky troughs, from splintered hay.

Flocks of sheep and herds of cows, descending from the countryside, loafed across the terraced bridges over the Arno. Scores of mules appeared, gleaming, their sweaty backs and carts tipping now and then under the odd boar carcass. Other carts bent under boxes of vegetables whose greens and yellows, beneath fragile tomatoes turning misshapen amid an excess ripeness sucked out of the oozy Tuscan blend of hot sun and lava-enriched soil, shone against the granite and marble of the new palaces.

The richness of those mornings, especially at the Old Market (*Mercato Vecchio*), which was to be converted in the nineteenth century into the Piazza della Repubblica, poured through the poetry of Florence's town crier and bell-ringer of some decades earlier, Antonio Pucci (c.1310–88):

Apothecaries and grocers put their wares on show;

Traders in pots and pitchers can be found –

* * *

Stalls elsewhere, though, deal in much fairer game

And they are richly laden all the year

With hares, wild boars and goats, fowl (wild and tame),

Partridges, pheasants and huge capons
 Along with other birds for the gourmet's delight –
 And if you want to hunt, buy hawks and falcons here.

* * *

Thus women from the farms as each new day succeeds
 Bring fresh supplies in, and the good cook bears
 Home again all that the kitchen needs.²

The sellers' pleasure in fiddling with their crops and animals, and smirking past each other, unfolded minutes from his path across the Ponte Vecchio, his most likely route. This took him along the river to the Ponte Trinità to meet his 'master of grammar' (according to Bernardo), probably Matteo della Rocca, or, if he went the other way, over the Ponte Trinità to Matteo's house at the foot of the bridge. Such practical mornings, with their swallows, lights and the nearby marketplace, were his familiars as he set out for his Latin. They came first, along with their inevitable crowds of hawkers, housewives, farmers and soldiers.

Bernardo paid Matteo five soldi, a trivial amount, probably because tutors were not permitted to accept more than an 'Easter tip' from their pupils, though it seems likely that he may on occasion have given Matteo somewhat more. Lessons with Niccolò's *maestro*, who taught the 'eight parts of [Latin] speech,' and who would have stressed the common medieval and Renaissance belief that grammar was the chiefest of the seven liberal arts (the others were logic, rhetoric, music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy), and that Latin grammar, along with ancient Greek, opened the door to all important knowledge and thought, or to the world's greatest works of poetry, history and philosophy, seem to have lasted just a few months.³

Probably they did not end simply because Matteo saw fit to refer by way of insult to one of a number of Niccolò's disreputable ancestors, Giovanni d'Agnolo, or Agiolino, Machiavelli, the brother of Buoninsegna, a seedy criminal type from the thirteenth century, still glumly remembered, whose notoriety slipping into darkness credited him on the one hand with arranging a truce between warring Guelph and Ghibelline factions in 1279–80, and on the other with rape, pederasty, gambling, usury and murder (he had killed a priest and been suspiciously pardoned).

In Florence's prickly world, his tutor would more likely have mentioned another better-regarded ancestor, the respected Alessandro di Filippo. More recently, in 1438, in return for an annual donation of twelve florins to the

Benedictine convent at Santa Felicità, he had been granted proprietary rights to the church's San Gregorio chapel.

Alessandro had been rich enough to commission a fresco by Domenico Ghirlandaio of Christ's descent from the cross. With masterpiece in tow, he had adopted the San Gregorio as his personal place of worship even as he offered for all to see luxuriant proof of his commitment to the arts and to the Machiavellis' enduring honour (the fresco has since disappeared).⁴

Whatever Bernardo's reason for releasing Niccolò's first tutor, by 1477 his Latin was reassigned to a *maestro* Battista di Filippo da Poppi, a chaplain at the church of San Benedetto, just beyond the Old Market and hard by Brunelleschi's *Duomo*.

Bits of masonry belonging to this minor church can still be seen, together with its minuscule Piazza di San Benedetto, or enough to make it clear that as Niccolò returned home, perhaps for lunch and later dinner (as many school children did, though a few brought their lunches), he would have seen the colossal dome – it would have been hard to miss, just around the corner – and this every school day, with its staggeringly uplifting rouge roof that seemed to heave at heaven in an assertion of Earth-defying power, a candid display of its sphere as one of the architectural wonders of the world, before he recrossed one of the nearby bridges.

With Battista, Niccolò's instruction would have proceeded in a more businesslike way. If the usual formula was followed, his lessons entailed memorizing verses from a *salterio*, or collection of religious poems. The sort of humanist education sought for him by his father typically required up to five years of Latin, plus training in Italian (it is not clear how much).⁵

A few more aspects of his early schooling can be deduced, however, and even some of his father's interests, together with a whiff of the intellectual fragrance of his home-life, from an intriguing detail: a book-exchange between his father and his tutor, Battista. On Bernardo's side, this exchange consisted of his borrowing Battista's copy of Pliny's *Natural History*, on 8 April 1478, as Bernardo recalled it, or when Niccolò was almost ten. Bernardo owned a library of seventeen or so books – the number kept changing – in print and manuscript, a quantity small enough to indicate that while he was an avid reader, he had little money.⁶

His lack of funds scarcely kept him from borrowing and exchanging books frequently with several of his banker-, bookseller- and jurist-friends. The Pliny exchanged with Battista, for instance, was a fine copy, translated into Italian ('*uno*

Plinio in volgare'), leather-bound and shod with silver-plated brass corners, or 'shoes,' and published in Venice two years earlier. Bernardo seems to have returned it after six weeks, on 28 May, though not, one may assume, without having read it and even discussed it or some of it with his Latin-studying son.⁷

This likelihood is not only plausible but worth considering. Pliny the Elder, who managed through sheer curiosity about volcanoes to get himself killed during the eruption of one of them, Mount Vesuvius near Pompeii in 79 BCE, may not have ranked among the great stylists of ancient Roman literature, but his *Natural History* had remained a staple of scientific learning throughout the Middle Ages into the Renaissance. The reason was that in no sense was his book just a compilation of biological, geological and astronomical facts according to the ancient Romans, or a rehash of Aristotle, everyone's pundit in science, aesthetics and politics.

In a number of ways, none of them intended, Pliny's *Natural History* had come to seem a fairly radical book, slipping past the dour clerical gaze at a time when Church censorship or disapproval might be devastating. His willingness to take up questions that theologians such as St Augustine had urged Christians to ignore, but which had become hot subjects again, ever since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, allowed his sole surviving major opus to act as a stick stirring a pot of controversies lately beginning to boil, as with his argument that nature was imperfect, even as Christian theology maintained the opposite, and that God had limitations:

The chief consolations for nature's imperfection in the case of man are that not even for God are all things possible – for he cannot, even if he wishes, commit suicide, the supreme boon that he has bestowed on man among all the penalties of life, nor bestow eternity on mortals or recall the deceased, nor cause a man [who] has lived not to have lived or one [who] has held high office not to have held it – and that he has no power over the past save to forget it, and (to link our fellowship with God by means of frivolous arguments as well) that he cannot cause twice ten not to be twenty.⁸

Though pagan, Pliny showed no hesitation about acknowledging a supreme being, or God, as had Plato, even if his God seemed shockingly indifferent to human affairs:

That the supreme being, whatever it be, pays heed to man's affairs is a ridiculous notion. Can we believe that it would not be defiled by so gloomy and so multifarious a duty?⁹

He also argued, in passages that were to become supremely important to Bernardo's son Niccolò and the development of his own ideas about the world, for the enhanced powers of fickle fortune, or the goddess *Fortuna*, not traditionally regarded as of great importance by the ancient Romans. He approved of Chance, or a universe that he perceived as lacking in strict determinism and that must be tolerant of human choices. His was a universe in which randomness might reign as God:

Everywhere in the whole world at every hour by all men's voices *Fortuna* alone is invoked and named, alone accused, alone impeached, alone pondered, alone applauded, alone rebuked and visited with reproaches; ... and we are so much at the mercy of chance that Chance herself, by whom God is proved uncertain, takes the place of God.¹⁰

Here – it could hardly be denied – might be a gateway, especially if one considered it as Bernardo may well have done in the light of other Greek and Roman books, such as Plato's *Timaeus*, then gaining a new appreciation, to an unchristian estimate of the world. At the very least, such passages promoted rebellious thoughts. It hardly mattered that the copy of Pliny belonged to a church chaplain who was his son's tutor. Christian humanism, peering over its own shoulder in astonishment at the intellectual freedom of the ancient Greek and Roman world, was untroubled by such risks.

Of equal importance to Niccolò's development, if with less influence on medieval and Renaissance thought, were the two books that Bernardo lent Battista by way of the exchange, his *Commentary on Scipio's Dream* and a *Saturnalia*, by the fifth-century Roman neo-Platonist Macrobius, who may or may not have been a Christian, but who moved easily between the Christian and pagan worlds somewhat before the collapse of the Roman empire.

Amazingly for his day, Macrobius had concerned himself with what is today called the unconscious. The admission key to it, he believed, must be allegory, and especially the type of allegory to be found in dreams. The sort of dream in which this could happen he called a *somnium*. He described it as presenting truth hidden by a bewildering story.

Allegorical dreams were to be distinguished from non-allegorical or practical ones, or *insomnia*, in which a dreamer might, for example, dream about food because the cupboard was bare. Beyond *insomnia* lay a more unsettling realm, that of *epialtes*, or nightmares, which he termed a third type (two further types he regarded as prophetic). *Epialtes* displayed diabolical beasts and frightening

if senseless goblins. All these types helped to shape Niccolò's deepest attitudes towards both dreams and language, and towards how he would come to view the world.

During the Middle Ages Macrobius was seen as contributing to allegorism, or to how books, especially the Bible, ought to be read by Christians. A proper reading of a biblical or for that matter any text, he believed, led its reader into knowledge of the divine by laying bare the sacred implications behind the words' literal meanings, or within the words themselves, as well as in the outside universe. Over the previous two centuries, this method of reading, now often applied in the personal arena of dreaming alone, came to be understood as casting illuminating lights on the nature of the self. Its approach transformed an entire cultural atmosphere by awakening readers for the first time to the stages of their conscious and unconscious mental processes.¹¹

An enthusiasm for spirituality, the ancient Greek and Roman world and history thus ran through all Bernardo's reading; it was reflected in the other books that Niccolò would have discovered in the small family library as he began to read on his own. They embodied the ideals of a growing class of Renaissance Christian humanists, and most of all perhaps those who might be deistic but not avowedly religious. It is surprising, for instance, that Bernardo owned no Bible (St Jerome's fourth-century Latin translation would not have been hard to get), though he mentions returning a borrowed copy of one to a Domenico Lippi on 13 March 1480. His books were mostly those of the admired ancient Greek and Roman philosophers and historians, as represented in Latin or Italian translations: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*; two volumes of Roman law, the *Codex Iustinianus* and *Digestum novum*, as might be expected of a lawyer; and Livy's *Three Decades*. The Livy is especially helpful in trying to understand him and something of the flavour of his relations to Niccolò.

The first-century Roman historian, only a few of whose 142 books on Roman history have survived, had been little read during the Middle Ages, but now attracted attention for his clarity of style, his insights into the formation of political states and his aphoristic insolence: 'Deceit in the conduct of a war is meritorious'; 'promises extracted by force need not be observed'; 'cunning and deceit will serve a man better than force to rise from a base condition to great fortune.'¹²

This particular copy was unbound, though printed, when Bernardo first came across it, in September 1475. It was offered to him by an obscure *maestro* Niccolò Tedesco (perhaps simply Niccolò the German), probably a scholar

and maybe a printer, perhaps a cartographer, and maybe all three in one, who wanted him to make an index for it that would include each of its myriad place names.

Producing the index turned out to be a fairly arduous task, and Bernardo finished his work only by July 1476, when Niccolò was seven and beginning to learn Latin. Bernardo wrote it out on sixty sheets of twice-folded paper, and received in payment the copy used to make it. Immediately, it seems, he decided to have it bound: its print was elegant, and book-binding was one of those happy adventures on which he had embarked with other books, taking them off to the neighbourhood *cartolaio*, or stationer. Money for binding turned out to be lacking at the moment, though – binding was expensive – and so he let the matter drop, hoping to manage it in the future.¹³

The Cosmic Package

Even more precious than his newly acquired Livy was the set of vital connections that it provided through his comprehensive index – remarkably, from a modern point of view – to the universe itself. If his law practice had never taken off, with the result that he had no established career because constant debts caused him to look a bit of a shambles or even a disgrace in the public eye, but not for any lack of charm and acuity – his friends hint that he had both in abundance – Bernardo understood that he was living in an age when important new questions were being raised about politics and the universe, and with startling answers proposed to some of them.

Certainly he understood that even a vague conception of the heavens' physical structure and their governance influenced anyone's life and choices. A sense of physical harmony propped up the idea of justice. An awareness of cosmic coherence lingered as a ghost behind the simplest business arrangement. Dream interpretation could be revealing. Even crossing a bridge for the sake of a Latin lesson might imply a hidden allegory.

Despite such self-evident facts, in Florence as well as right across Europe in his day, no one discussed the infinite. Everyone believed that the physical universe must be a sealed, limited affair, a bit like a round box: it was implacably finite. Centuries earlier, St Augustine had dismissed the tempting hypothesis of infinity as encroaching on Christian doctrine, and best left to God.¹ God was understood to inhabit the great gaps of eternity beyond space and time, which itself was conceived as abstract, absolute and independent of space. If God was pure Reason, or *ratio*, as seemed to everyone a sensible proposition, then logic accompanied by faith in His hidden essence ought to suffice for those in search of divine contact or heavenly knowledge.

Beyond these assurances, a long-accepted model of the physical universe seemed to take account of the known physical facts themselves. The Ptolemaic System represented outer space, as it is described today, in terms of a round

compartment consisting of nine transparent spheres, each nesting within the next largest, and with this mobile-like arrangement ranging upward from the Earth and moon to the Empyrean, or the fiery abode of God in changeless eternity.

The second-century Alexandrian astronomer's drawings and discussions of a neatly tucked-in cosmos, based on earlier recorded observations of the skies by the ancient Babylonians, were also seen as complementing Augustinian spiritual postulates. Ptolemy's astronomical system thus agreed with Christian theology in offering an account of everyone's human address in the universe. This lay not at its centre, as modern scientists and others have often assumed, and even if that is how it appears, but at its bottom. An essential feature of medieval cosmic reality, it is described by Chaucer in Book V of his *Troilus and Criseyde* and by Dante in his *Commedia*, as well as in the accounts of scores of commentators. The universe's up-down nature may be better grasped as one realizes that medieval people refer to the Earth's location as 'wretched,' desolate and nearly abandoned by God's descending and hence weakening powers of Reason. The Earth is almost deserted in the lowest region of a cosmos understood as vertical, or as presenting permanent directions.

Of equal importance to understanding the fixed spatial design are two other facts. The first is that while the Earth was assumed to be round, or a globe, it was believed to be static. Its motionlessness meant that the sun literally rose, passed overhead and set. The sphere of the stars, or *stellatum*, the eighth sphere, below that of the Primum mobile, revolved in a measurable loftiness far above the Earth and those celestial bodies visible to the naked eye and located in their own revolving spheres: the moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.

The second fact is that reality in an ultimate sense did not, as is now believed, consist in phenomena, or physical experiences, including physical events on Earth. Physics and the physical world were doomed. Over time, they would wear out, decay and vanish. Their importance was illusionary. Sense data themselves were seen as promoting delusions. Reality – or those elements that would endure and which could therefore be understood as superior to wear and tear – lay beyond the physical, and consisted in God and eternity, or, a bit like logic itself, in non-physical exceptions to decay.

The round Earth, placed at what looks like the centre of attention in the Ptolemaic but Christian-adapted and modified universal system, thus rested at the one point in it farthest from God, or reality, and so in the worst of positions

from the standpoint of importance.² This wretchedness of the human location also rendered individual salvation far more problematic: if heaven shone high above everything, then damnation, as enacted in Hell, must be located below it, or below the universe, so to speak: Hell lay beneath the equator and oceans, or not too far from the sinners themselves, and so seemed more unpleasantly convenient than the distant blessings of paradise.

Despite these frosty if rationally organized beliefs, a spectral idea of infinity, or at least a suspicion that all might not be well with this broad account of space and time, had begun to gain ground during Bernardo's lifetime. The possibility of a revolution in ideas of perception and vision had long been taken seriously, and especially by painters, though even others indifferent to art could scarcely avoid seeing the changes in progress as they attended their nearest church – and almost everyone went to church more than a few times a year.

A powerful fad in depicting three-dimensional space according to naturalism, along with what it entailed – a drastic foreshortening of everything, from bent legs, arms, knees and horses' bodies to landscapes and lakes – had widely caught on. It was gaining a broad and growing support in the various community art centres, or the churches and homes of the middle and upper classes. Esteemed painters in Florence and other Italian cities found themselves competing to produce the most accurate naturalistic representations of a mundane rather than an eternal reality, or the complex, scruffy world in which people actually lived.

Rivalries over how to embrace a new naturalism with geometrical skill had been gaining momentum ever since Paolo Uccello (1396/7–1475) unveiled his startling *Annunciation* (perhaps in the 1440s: it is now lost) at the church of Santa Maria Maggiore. This was a painting that his near contemporary, the historian-artist Vasari, described as 'the first in good style showing artists how, with grace and proportion, lines can be made to recede to a vanishing point (*punto di fuga*), and how a small and restricted space on a flat surface may be extended so that it appears distant and large... . Artists achieving this effect ... deceive the eye so surely that the painting seems to be in actual relief.'³

The rabbit-out-of-a-hat evocation of a naturalistic illusion, or visual deception, even if others credited the same startling invention to the slightly earlier Masaccio (1401–?1428), seemed irresistible for its simplicity, though it might well have raised red flags among traditionalists. One reason was that any calculation of the geometrically sound vanishing point, or the spot, or *fuga*, or point of flight on a plane surface at which the viewer's intersecting lines of

sight enabled the eye to experience a psychological and aesthetic lift-off, or, as it seemed, flight into an implied, invisible space that seemed to run on forever, provided a glimpse into infinity.

No one as yet considered infinity, but the implications of the aesthetic shift were understood as momentous. Far from merely supplying a clever new way to make paintings, the *punto di fuga* was rife with philosophical and religious implications. This became especially clear if the results of adopting it were compared to the near static basis of earlier art. Medieval paintings and frescoes, for instance, still on display in most churches, and so appearing directly beside the new naturalistic ones, emphasized a deliberate two-dimensional flatness, forcing the viewer to peer either up towards Heaven or down towards Hell. Hell might be grimly emblazoned with punishing demons, but it was in any event divorced from an Earth seen as isolated and wretched. Might the naturalistic style not induce a psychological and spiritual loosening of ties to the Ptolemaic System itself? Might it not invite a drastic expansion of empiricism, or even some trust in sense data as a standard superior to logic and metaphysics?

These questions seem even more apt when it is recognized that painting was not the only field, or even the first, in which attempts to represent physical space, or infinity in some definite sense, or to manipulate vision so as to imply and control distances, including those beyond the visible, had already led to controversial discoveries. Over a century earlier another Florentine, Salvino d'Armato (d. ?1312), later to be buried in the same Santa Maggiore church as that in which Uccello exhibited his *Annunciation*, may have managed the world's first accurate grinding of lenses and shown how they might be used to make spectacles. For Salvino, the geometrical challenge, to come up with an instrument that might improve vision, was the same as that faced by Uccello and other painters interested in the vanishing point, even if it was expressed through a different medium: how to mould a transparent piece of glass so as to produce angles of sight converging evenly across a convex surface, and in the process engender focused magnification.⁴

From a practical point of view the consequences of Salvino's invention were widespread and important: an often well-educated Florentine population was becoming inured to new and hitherto dismissed insights into physical reality. Bernardo himself appears to have entertained some of them. Evidence indicating his enthusiasm, along with its influence on his son, Niccolò, is to be found in another coincidence: that as he began work on his index for Livy's history, he took on loan from a friend a copy of Ptolemy's *Cosmographia*.

Printed in Venice, this encyclopedia-like book, promoting medieval geographical ideas and still valuable as a reference tool in his own day, included many of the same place names as cropped up in the *Livy*. Bernardo seems to have kept it beside him while working on his index, regarding it as essential.⁵

That it was unquestionably useful, and that indices were then of far greater value than is today appreciated, is amply confirmed by the urgings of another Florentine, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75), famous during the Renaissance less for his *Decameron* and *Filostrato*, the love story that inspired Chaucer and became the source of his *Troilus and Criseyde*, than for his works of minor interest to modern readers but which his contemporaries regarded as exciting and *avant-garde*. These were his compilations of descriptive lists indicating relationships, among them his genealogies of the pagan gods and his tedious-seeming inventories of mountains, swamps, valleys, rivers, lakes and notable spots generally.

Boccaccio had been less medieval in outlook than his contemporary, Chaucer, and much more concerned to establish a modern and even alphabetically responsible order for his often geographically befuddled contemporaries: he set out to supply them with increasing quantities of the solid, clear details of their earthly human address. He also suggested that other authors ought to create their own lists and indices.⁶

By now the idea of doing so had come to complement yet another fad springing to life in Bernardo's fifteenth century: that gathering about maps, records of distant journeys, though not as yet of the unknown New World, and three-dimensional depictions in woodcuts and etchings, as if viewed from above or in flight, of the house-by-house appearances of cities.⁷

Bernardo's *Livy* contained none of these more imaginative types of illustrations, but his index, if published as part of a revised edition of *Livy's* book (it is unknown whether this was done), would have rendered his history more practical for readers consulting Ptolemy and other authors referring to the places that he cited.

All these subtle glimmerings of a prospective major change in old-fashioned attitudes, or of a cosmic shift, though nobody as yet knew how it would move forward, or whether it would, or in which direction it might propel human consciousness, blended into a passionate and strengthening fascination with the civilized ancient past.

Histories of Florence had now come into vogue. Flavio Biondo's *Deche* (*Decades*, 1441) presented a caustic view of the city's growth, leading into

the Renaissance, following the fifth-century sack of Rome and tumultuous epochs of bloodshed. Bernardo borrowed Biondo's *Deche* in 1485, and his *Italia Illustrata*, a volume significant to the relatively new discipline of archeology, in 1477, from Bianco di Francesco da Casavecchia.⁸

A more comprehensive treatment of Florentine history, which would also intensely interest Niccolò as he grew older, Leonardo Bruni's humanist *History of the Florentine People* (1444) reached even further back, to the city's Etruscan founders, as well as forward into the fifteenth century. It amounted to a now celebrated attempt to reveal what that revered historian and government official had seen as the city's thousand-year-old quest for political stability and freedom.

Ancient Roman architecture had also begun to stimulate a novel curiosity. Roman ruins, visible in many of the city's *piazze*, were demolished to make way for new Renaissance buildings. Brunelleschi's *Duomo*, constructed to rival if not surpass the Roman Pantheon in size and beauty, expressed not simply admiration for the past but an unmistakable challenge to it. His design of the church of Santa Felicità, a remodelling across from the Machiavelli *palazzo*, offered an identical, complex challenge, as did his plans for a hospital and other secular buildings.

Everywhere architectural experimentation seemed to be gaining fluency through expanding ambitions. Narrow streets, long wrapped in semi-darkness, began to open to bands of light alongside clusters of medieval watchtowers, some soon to be torn down amid the new dust of chisel and hammer. Aesthetic questions and empirical awakenings poured forth on all sides, and Niccolò's Latin lessons seemed as much a gateway to a new stage of civilization as to the study of an old one.

Poetry, Music and Militarism

At the same time, in the late 1470s, the grimmer likelihood of war seemed – as so often – on everyone’s mind. Far more than a fortress, Florence was an educational, mercantile, artistic and banking centre. Despite the city’s unending involvement in battles and sieges over the previous fifteen centuries, it lacked anything like a militaristic tradition, especially in comparison with rival city states, such as Venice, Genoa and Milan. For decades too it had flourished amid an authoritarian if prosperous peace. As battlefield successes once led to rejoicing, they had also induced military neglect.

To the population’s educated ruling class – even Florentine bankers and merchants often busied themselves with studying classical Latin and Greek – the impervious calm seemed a condition that might only be improved.¹

For years it had been pampered by Cosimo de’Medici the Elder, since his return from exile in 1434, to his death in 1464, and then for five years by his heir, his invalid son Piero. Piero’s son, Lorenzo, sought to temper the quality of the peace by expanding a number of security pacts in 1474, to include such larger powers as Venice, Milan and the often bellicose papacy. Military interests continued to take second place to making money, staging ceremonial jousts and colourful sporting events, and more recently, for the government’s legalistic and well-trained minds, speculating on the vanished glories of ancient Greece and Rome.²

In part because of their relative newness, the influence of classical studies, and their role in Bernardo and Niccolò’s lives, cannot be overstressed. For one thing, they created a sense of legitimacy. The faded brilliance of ancient Athens, the beshrouded majesty of Homer’s epic poems, sieved through poor Latin translations but which those who studied law and other subjects at the university of Florence-Pisa recognized as the dust-covered sources of their own civilization, had only just begun to be wiped off, polished and analysed in their originals by the end of the fourteenth century.

Recovered knowledge, imported from Athens across the Aegean, cast a fresh light on the imperial if in many ways gritty grandeur of the ancient Roman empire. Its flattering ruins everyone could glimpse in the nearest street, but they appeared a bit like the suggestive bones of incomprehensible dinosaurs, or the abandoned trinkets of a god who had been consumed in a mysterious conflagration.

A major reason for the growth of humanist or classical studies was cultural and historical ignorance. It left masses of people at sea in respect to their past while fostering a belief in their modern cultural inferiority. As the daunting conviction settled in that ancient times had been far grander than present ones, there also swung into play an infectious desire to slough off the ignorance itself.

A new hopefulness had emanated at first from a single compelling personality, astonishing as the idea may now seem, the poet Francesco Petrarca (1304–74), who had urged on everyone – and so not just on scholars – the inestimable value of the classics (he himself had acquired only a crude familiarity with ancient Greek). Petrarch's prodding complemented the unexpected arrival in Florence, if a bit late in the day, in 1397, of Italy's first real expert in ancient Greek literature, Manuel Chrysoloras, himself a Byzantine. His delivery before large audiences at the city's twin-branched university over the next several years of a series of spellbinding lectures on their heritage in ancient Greek poetry and philosophy caught the attention of the Florentine *literati*, a group that included future politicians and merchants.³ It was now that the city began to head down a path to change, as it was later to change the world. In the end, Petrarch's impact on education, including reading and writing, seems as intriguing as the self-contradictory age in which Niccolò was growing up and learning Latin: on the one hand, gifted and daring; on the other, stubborn and superstitious.

A compelling if occasionally bombastic poet, Petrarch had enjoyed a widely lauded career as the most esteemed, laurel-crowned, Italian literary figure of the previous century. His reputation rested mostly on his scores of superb sonnets addressed to his beloved Laura, whose existence was always a matter of conjecture, but a more pertinent set of questions might have been raised about his favourite poetic form, the sonnet itself. Its unusual qualities had first been tested as an opportunity for patterns of poetic brilliance in Dante's *La vita nuova* (c.1292–1300), but they rapidly began to appeal to anyone who wanted to write poetry. As he grew older, they appealed in important ways to Niccolò himself.

The sonnet had been conceived or, more accurately, invented, by a *notaro*, or lawyer, Giacomo da Lentino, in 1225–30, probably in Sicily. Even in Niccolò's day, though, and from significant points of view, it remained an influential aesthetic novelty. Since the mid-1470s, or just a few years earlier, sonnets had begun to be set to music and sung. Petrarch himself had known the tricky, rhymed form, however, mostly as non-musical, or meditational. It seemed simply a one-stanza lyric of fourteen lines meant to be read aloud to oneself or another person or group of people, or sent off to someone in a sonnet-exchange, or *tenzone*.⁴

Even unsung, though, it was regarded almost from the moment of its invention as revolutionary, for the single compelling reason that since ancient Greek and Roman times it was the first poetic form to be incompatible with the by then universal requirement that all poems be set to music.

Silent reading was the sonnet's transforming and novel invitation, and it stimulated a new, spreading habit of reading in silence. Its built-in, unique feature, that the turn or *verso* after its eighth line rendered it at variance with the strictures of medieval music theory, according to which any twist or *verso* in the middle of a lopsided stanzaic structure made impossible the single unbroken melody demanded for the whole stanza, set it apart from other types of poetry. This quality also hinted from the start at the sonnet's potential power, that its intrinsic meditational nature might lead it to influence other branches of literature – that it might become a trend-setter.⁵

If writing in the new, non-music-oriented way were to catch on, as soon began to happen, might it not stimulate an abandonment of the performance requirement everywhere, and even dramatic changes in how nearly everyone read and wrote?

All this seems clear enough now because it is broadly recognized that prior to the invention of the sonnet, or throughout the High Middle Ages, readers would have encountered nearly all texts – and not only poems – audibly. In the fifth century Saint Augustine had noticed his mentor, Saint Ambrose, poring over a biblical page in silence, but his amazement had simply proved the rule. It seems apparent, in other words, that the practice of exclusively oral reading had been established throughout Europe as early as the fifth century, and that it had led to the performance or reading aloud of almost all poetry.

This had hardly been the case among the ancient Greeks and Romans, for whom silent reading apparently coexisted with public performance. Catullus's lyrics invited both meditation and recitation. Juvenal's satires might be read

as well at home as theatrically in a tavern. Virgil's *Eclogues*, like Horace's odes, encouraged the intimacy of silent self-confrontation.

Eight hundred years after the fall of Rome, however, or during the first decades of the thirteenth century, a period later seen as the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, the stimulus for the invention of the sonnet had been the first complete translation into medieval Latin of Plato's suppressed and probably last work, his *Timaeus*. The translation itself was done at the court of the anti-papal, brilliant emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. Shortly afterwards, the sonnet, invented and honed by Giacomo da Lentino, seems to have seen the light of day, most likely in Sicily, though Frederick's court tended to move quite a lot through his Italian-German empire. The invention itself, however, had come about because of yet another remarkable development.

In the *Timaeus* Plato had offered a description of the architecture of the heavens, alongside a set of mathematical ratios describing their structure, together with an argument that the same ratios also described the architecture of the human soul. By the fifteenth century these ratios had come to matter to Niccolò's understanding of the cosmos, as well as to that of Bernardo and anyone else in the know.⁶

The reason here was that Plato had viewed the soul as a microcosm or replica of the heavenly macrocosm. Each vibrated according to an 'inaudible' or magnificent music. This silent-seeming music (Aristotle had described it as 'celestial') was in part produced by the swishing through the universal ether (whose existence could be assumed, again following Aristotle) of the five known planets, and the moon, the sun and the *stellatum*, and partly by the ratios themselves, which Plato regarded as incorporating divine harmonies.

For Renaissance poets, or Niccolò's contemporaries, Plato's majestic conception of a universal if inaudible musical order was to become his most important if unacknowledged gift to poetry and literature. The reason in this case was that Giacomo da Lentino had adopted it as the mathematical basis of the structure of the sonnet. In a stroke of aesthetic brilliance, he had transferred the principles of the Platonic music of the heavens and the human soul into a poetic form – or, from the Renaissance point of view, reproduced the architecture of the Ptolemaic System in a new, potentially silent poem whose unheard music consisted for everyone, including Niccolò, of the 'ditties of no tone,' as Keats would later describe celestial music in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.'

Plato's gift of design to what became the Western world's oldest poetic form still in prominent use (for so it continues today), together with its influence

on Renaissance and later literature, via Dante, Petrarch and their successors, including in the years to come Niccolò and perhaps even his father, is thus of crucial importance to understanding their deeper conceptions of the universe and the human world.

Nor is even this the whole story. The sonnet's meditation-inducing lopsidedness, in which an octet precedes a sestet, or in which a problem, often in love, is depicted as a torment in its first part, with its resolution provided in its second, not only caught on but stimulated the development of a new literary expressiveness whose moorings were sunk in silent, self-conscious reading. As time passed, performance itself began to lose some of its seductiveness.

Inner frustrations, later described by Freud as the source of self-consciousness, began to become fashionable literary themes. Dante's *Commedia*, written in exile and in the wake of the new, silence-inducing form, is perhaps the world's first epic intended as much to present the silently endured conflicts between self and soul as to invite public performance. The *Commedia* is among the first works of modern literature to limn the protagonist's (possibly Dante's own) growth into an enlightened, spiritual and in his case Christian awareness as the result of inner conflicts.

The sonnet's curious commitment to logic, or rationality, or to resolving frustrations, also enabled it to act as a catalyst for the development of an inner-focused literature generally and to inspire new fashions in fiction. The attraction of these changes was to become pervasive throughout Niccolò's school years.

In belonging to the first generation to hear sonnets set to music and to listen to the new, unpredictable type of music composed for them, in the 1470s, he was becoming party to an extraordinary invitation. It offered not only a chance to resolve internal conflicts in an inventive way, or to ease his path as he wrote sonnets of his own along with (somewhat later) political-meditative poetry, but to grow along meditative-aesthetic lines as he engaged in the political-literary work of his life to come.

The age itself, or the period of his youth, was continuously caught up in a struggle with its own capacity for invention. As in any age, many inventions never got off the ground. Often, however, superstitions competed with innovation, along with a suspicion of machinery itself as 'unnatural.' Leonardo's war engines, for example, his submarine and armoured car, despite expectations by the early 1480s as in mid-1478 that momentous military violence was on its way in which both could provide an edge to one side or the other, were never built.

Petrarch himself, though a supporter of aesthetic novelties, remained throughout his life a fierce opponent of human dissection and autopsies for the sake of medical research, driven by an unshakeable conviction that the body was sacred.

Physicians, he argued, were 'godless.' The human body ought to be seen as a reincarnation of Christ's body, or even God. To dissect a corpse was to insult the divine, or to tamper with the sacred and inviolate order of things.

Many educated people, including aesthetically innovative poets and artists – with Leonardo a noted exception, slicing away at his stolen corpses in his candlelit studio in dead of night, poring over skeletons, veins, nerves and muscles in his quest for more accurate anatomical knowledge – agreed with Italy's foremost sonneteer while themselves carrying on experiments in paint, oil and perspective, and subscribing to turgid beliefs in witchcraft, astrology and the medieval doctrine, seldom questioned in public though it lacked empirical support, that the universe must be finite.

Murder in the Duomo

In early 1478, the whisper of particularized hatred rippling along the streets seemed at first inaudible. Certainly Lorenzo de' Medici and his brother Giuliano, its targets, were oblivious to it. Had they caught wind of its grotesque energy, or learned of the strenuous and successful efforts to conceal its sinuosity, they might still not have reacted with alarm.

They and their supporters were convinced that they had provided far too much assistance to the city's population at large to provoke any serious hostility – and even in the end when this agreeable vanity blew up in their faces as an uproar whipping into assassinations, hangings and war itself, entertained the belief, and perhaps rightly, that most people empathized with the prevailing Florentine civil order so long and firmly under their control.¹ Their behind-the-scenes machinations had been much too sleight of hand, after all, amounting at most to a raised, discreet fist in the velvet glove, to be stimulating of seditious mistrust.

Yet the most vicious envy conducive to a dank sort of unguent scheming, and focused in Rome as well as Florence and Urbino, and boiling towards a calculated eruption in January or, when January seemed inopportune, in April 1478, seemed to lay bare for those in on it serious veins of treachery.

At the same time, and for reasons to be revealed later – it cannot help to leapfrog often over events to their effects – one may reasonably anticipate that the special terror of the bloodstained, taxing hours to come, and their suffocating aftermath, which would continue to unravel for decades, made the profoundest possible impression on Niccolò, and surely on his father. He had just borrowed Pliny's *Natural History* and might have been reading it at home with his son.

In this light, and for the sake of clarity, it is useful to begin with a single detail, the contrast between two libraries, and the naïve if often held belief that humanist values militate against violence and murder. The personalities

involved, including those of the competitive Medici brothers, also deserve investigation.

As for the libraries, by 1492, or fourteen years later (but at the earliest moment for which a reliable list exists), Leonardo da Vinci's contained thirty-seven printed books, a quantity typical of none-too-well-off and self-educated people, though that of Bernardo, Niccolò's father, contained fewer. Leonardo's eclectic collection included the familiar humanist-leaning works by Aesop, Livy (his *Decades*, perhaps even the edition for which Bernardo had made his index), Ovid (his *Metamorphoses*, read in schools across Europe throughout the Middle Ages), Plutarch's *Lives*, John Mandeville (the popular travel writer, also liar, charmer and inventor of most of his adventures), the Bible, the Psalms, and books on mathematics, surgery, military strategy, weapons, music and law.²

By comparison, in 1478 the library of the organizing military commander committed to the Pazzi Conspiracy, as the groping hatred directed at the Medici brothers came to be known, the Duke Federico da Montefeltro of Urbino, one of the wealthiest men in Italy, contained over a thousand of the world's most exquisite and lushly illuminated manuscripts, many bound in creamy silver and leather, along with more than fifty early printed books, or incunabula, which with a trace of embarrassment he regarded as inferior to his manuscripts, despite his awareness that they ranked among the choicest products of the most important mechanical invention to date in human history: an imitative printing device more revolutionary than the wheel.³

A comparison between these libraries implies a good deal more than itself, and bits of it seem menacing as well as crucial to understanding the atmosphere and values, so different from modern ones, surrounding Niccolò's youth. If Federico's was one of the rarest collections of books not only in Italy but in the world, and if his court soon came to stand as a model of Renaissance courtly ideals in Baldesar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1516), his small city of Urbino was a paradigm of civilized perfection among the many remarkable cities of Renaissance Italy.

Some forty years later, Niccolò – or for a long time by then, Machiavelli – recalled these details, personalities and the events surrounding them, which he would now experience indirectly. Each affected the rest of his life. Their nuances would change his city, its history and his interests.

Florence had long seemed settled into a gap of serenity astride the opposed

banks of the Arno and beneath the encircling crests of a set of rugged, soaring hills. Behind its walls, under its red-tiled roofs, and with the orb-like reddish *Duomo* at its centre, if considered from one of the hilltops it resembled nothing so much as a prize fruit, or intellectual strawberry. Urbino, by contrast and as Castiglione describes it, perched 'on the slopes of the Apennines towards the Adriatic ... among hills that are perhaps not as pleasant as those we see in many other places,' but 'still blessed by Heaven with a most fertile and bountiful countryside [causing it] beside the wholesomeness of the air [to] abound in all the necessities of life.'⁴

Chief among these necessities, as Castiglione admits, apart from the 'palace thought by many to be the most beautiful to be found anywhere in all Italy,' were the 'prudence, humanity, justice, generosity [and] undaunted spirit' of its ruler, the Duke himself. Castiglione makes no bones about Federico's selfishness, though, flipping the coin to take stock of his steelier if equally praiseworthy qualities, as they were then understood: 'his military prowess, signally attested to by his many victories, the capture of impregnable places, the sudden readiness of his expeditions, the many times when with but small forces he routed large and very powerful armies, and the fact that he never lost a single battle; so that not without reason we may compare him to many famous men among the ancients.'⁵

Witnesses remarked on Federico's periods of lordly calm, followed by grumbling, the gnarled *politesse* expressed in strict silences enforced in the precincts of his vast palace and his toleration of atrocities, especially if they yielded harvests of costly though pilfered books.

He had earned most of his money as Italy's most respected mercenary, or *condottiere*, doing so at a time when, amid constant shortages of Italian troops and experienced generals, together with unceasing armed struggles over the destiny of the Italian city-states, to be any sort of trusty gun for hire was to be counted heroic, no matter how nonchalant the throat-slitting.

On capturing Volterra in June 1472, for instance, while fulfilling a lucrative commission for Lorenzo de' Medici himself – the purpose was to restore Medici control over several Volterran-seized alum mines – the avuncular, strategic Federico had looked the other way as his men sacked and burned the city. He had apologized to the survivors, but what reveals more about his ethics was his failure to return an invaluable group of forty or more (the exact number is unknown) illuminated Hebrew manuscripts – rich loot for the ducal library – lifted from the shelves of the merchant-scholar Menahem ben Aharon Volterra.

No doubt the price of this addendum to his collection seemed less than steep. Menahem and hundreds of others, including women and children, were murdered by Federico's rampaging soldiers. Scores of women were raped. The city itself had been left a pile of filth-splattered ruins in flames, its devastation compounded by a coincidental storm that brought on an obliterating landslide.⁶

By 1478, and regardless of Federico's winking at the Volterranean ghastliness, his library had become a touted extravagance, guided by his ambition to attain the heights of scholarly acquisition. At the start of his book-buying, some years earlier, when his relations with Lorenzo were more cordial, he had purchased his codices in Florence at the shop of the noted book dealer Vespasiano da Bisticci (c.1422–98), who also supplied the Medici and other wealthy humanist book-buyers throughout Italy. In those days he ordered fine batches of new manuscripts alongside the better esteemed older ones, with the plushiest often the work of Vespasiano's own staff of copyists and illuminators. More recently, or by the mid-1470s, he had begun to shift his orders for new manuscripts into Urbino, enabling his duchy to swivel into prominence as a centre of manuscript production whose quality verged on exceeding that of Florence.

Along these lines it should be acknowledged that the invention of moveable type had scarcely impeded the respected arts of manuscript copying and illumination. On the contrary, as investments and items of unsurpassable beauty, the harder-to-make type of book had actually increased in value. Improvements in print technology stimulated greater demands than ever for illuminated Bibles, for example. A single superb biblical second volume, delivered to Federico just months after the Pazzi Conspiracy claimed its first victims, or a month or so past Niccolò's tenth birthday, elicited a letter of gratitude to Lorenzo, in June, 1478.⁷

Even more revealing of Federico's personality was a well-known double portrait of him with his son Guidobaldo, esteemed for more than its restrained grandiosity (plate IV). The painting was probably completed by 1475, when his son and heir was three or four, and is likely the work of Pedro Berruguete (*d.*1502). As many have suggested, it seems done from life, and shows the obese, placid, stumpy, palmy, roly-poly Duke in profile and from a poky angle that emphasizes his mountainous, hooked nose. He relaxes on a throne-like chair, clad in parade

armour overlaid with a red tunic. An ermine boa, symbolic of nobility, is tossed about his neck. Tied at his left calf is the ribbon of the Order of the Garter.

Aside from these and other accoutrements of power and heredity – Guidobaldo, resplendent in goose-bumpy pride, stands at attention beside him, one arm resting on the paternal knee while the other grasps the imperial sceptre – what remains intriguing, though the fact has not so far been remarked, is the Duke's behaviour. He holds before him an open copy of his *Commentary on the Book of Job* by Pope Gregory I (590–604), or a manual on how to live the pious Christian life, but is shown reading with his lips closed, or in silence.⁸

Other contemporary paintings, to be sure, also show people with books: an *Annunciation*, for instance, by Alunno di Benozzi (also late fifteenth century?), in which Mary, the mother of Christ, appears with what is probably an open Bible. Almost none shows the sitter reading, though, and still fewer the sitter reading in silence (an exception is a cut-down portrait of Saint Ambrose by Giovanni di Paolo (c.1400–82): both paintings are at the Metropolitan Museum in New York).

That Federico da Montefeltro, thief, soldier, nobleman, bibliophile, despot, humanist and dedicated scholar, is depicted in a semi-official portrait as reading is only to be expected, given his passion for manuscripts. The comparatively rare act of reading in silence, however, suggests his conscious approval of the revolution in reading habits – that astonishing change from fashionable performance-reading to the newly fashionable reading in meditative privacy – now underway among educated people.

The Duke's *studiolo*, a private reading room which was to become the antecedent of the modern home library or den, and which he ordered custom-built at his palace in Urbino, also argues a commitment to the new spirit of individualism and cultivated solitude then beginning to assert itself in the arts and to a lesser extent in politics. The walls are set in vivid *trompe-l'oeil* intarsia depictions of books, plus more than twenty sensitive portraits culled from the medieval-Renaissance pantheon of philosophical luminaries, among them Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy and Augustine.⁹

At the moment, as seems plain, the Duke was worried about matters less refined: organizing a deadly conspiracy. New evidence from a decoded letter sent by him on 14 February 1478 to Piero Felici and Agostino Staccoli, his emissaries in Rome, but meant to be delivered to Pope Sixtus IV, reveals that he had been hired by the seditious clique plotting the overthrow of the entire

Florentine leadership through ambush and assassination (the precise extent of his involvement has not until lately been established).

In the letter, Federico refers discreetly to the bristling plans by now afoot. He urges speed and decisiveness. He also promises to provide a small supporting body of soldiers from Siena. As matters fell out, his contribution amounted to about 550 armed men, plus fifty knights. He assures the Pope that on the day appointed 'for [the] main business' his troops will be formed up outside Florence, ready to march in and take over. In a section of the letter not in code, he again alludes to the conspirators' 'main business' – by implication the killing of Lorenzo and Giuliano – directing his Roman agents to thank Sixtus, whose involvement was soon to lead into war against Florence itself, for the gift to his son Guido of an expensive gold chain (his son appears wearing it in the double portrait with his father).¹⁰ Federico might even have thanked the Pope, if a bit superfluously, for his own ennoblement some years earlier, in 1474.

In fact his prosperous military career owed a great deal to the manipulations of another major character in on the conspiracy, and with whom, at least indirectly, Niccolò was to have much to do, the sly, restlessly ambitious Francesco della Rovere (Pope from 1471 to 1484).

Sixtus IV's unabashed nepotism, which followed on his election as Pope, had swiftly led to the complementary elevation of six of his nephews to posh positions as cardinals (one may have been his own son), accompanied by scandal-provoking squabbles over medals, cameos, gold cups, marriages, palaces, pearls, tiaras and stacks of plate, in the midst of which spiritual values seemed to disappear.

Though records exist making mention of his laughter, and even scatterings of laughter in his presence, there survives none of its warmth. A chill hovers over the accounts of his magnificent feasts in the marbled halls of the Vatican. Guests recalled his squat papal fingers imprisoned in their crushes of gold and monstrous gems and his insistence on absolute loyalty, nourished by blackmail in Federico's case, through the marriage of one of Sixtus's opportunistic nephews, Giovanni della Rovere, to Federico's oldest daughter, thus snipping off all remaining ties between the Duke and Lorenzo de' Medici.

The Pope's gargantuan appetites by no means expressed his multiple talents, however, and in the end he shone forth as more acute than is suggested by his materialistic grasping. His efficient government, to cite one instance, reflected his thoroughly modern imagination. Having grown up in rustic poverty away from Roman extravagance – perhaps among Ligurian fishermen – he came

up with daring programmes for widening and extending the clotted streets of his two-thousand-year-old metropolis. He cleared out slums, encouraged commerce and trade, established better hospitals and finally redesigned the Vatican, hiring for his project to transform the central mansion of the Christian world the most respected artists, among them Botticelli and Ghirlandaio, even as he ordered the construction of the new and eponymous Sistine Chapel.

Sixtus had been a distinguished scholar during his long-gone seminary days, when he also offered a piquant sketch of good looks. By now his passion for scholarship had not died, but in the late 1470s the good looks had tilted into a ballooning fatness, heaviness of jowl, shortness of breath, slithery toothlessness and an imperial stare.

His hatred of the Medici led to his support of the Pazzi Conspiracy, but only as long as no blood was shed (yet was not his innocent-seeming insistence on a bloodless coup just posturing?). His envy of the Medicis' banking acumen was intensified by his thwarted yen to secure one of their loans so he could purchase the picturesque town of Imola for his notorious nephew Girolamo Riario (perhaps his son), but which Lorenzo wanted for himself.

Sixtus next turned to the older banking family, the Pazzi, for his loan, and received it, but while with his customary canniness he retained the more influential Medici as his Vatican bankers, a nasty undercurrent of animosity persisted between the two men.¹¹

These and murkier grudges became known only later. In the meantime, if better understood in banking circles, the resentments of the Pazzi themselves, or the more livid stars of the plot, festered and boiled – mostly those of Francesco, the family's dwarf-like, jittery, dyspeptic manager in Rome, and Jacopo, their acerbic overlord. His stinginess and snarling bouts of despair, often unleashed when he lost at cards, led him at first to dismiss the planned coup as too risky. In the end he embraced it with morbid excitement as he stomped about the corridors of the larger of his two Florentine palaces (after the conspiracy débacle, it was renamed the Palazzo Quaratesi).

His palace itself had been designed by Brunelleschi for his father, Andrea, but was built by him. Its sophisticated charms included a ground floor meant to imitate the rural graces of old farm houses. A tart elegance throughout, plus a Donatello-modelled escutcheon stationed in the courtyard, may have consoled his explosive temperament, which seemed ill-equipped to deal with frustrations.

The Pazzi themselves, who above all must be brought into any account of the violence to come, traced their lineage and claims on Florence to the First Crusade. In 1099, one Raniero had commanded a Tuscan regiment all the way to Jerusalem. He returned carrying a sacred flame supposedly lit at Christ's tomb. Raniero had also acquired what became the family name when he was dubbed *pazzo*, or the crazy one. In legend at least he had opted to ride the whole distance back to Florence seated the wrong way round on his horse, to shield his sacred flame from the wind. Ever since, in fact, on Saturday during Passion Week, a coal has been lit at the Carroccio to the Cantonata dei Pazzi to mark his devotion: its glowing ember is borne to the *Duomo* 'and, in both places, an artificial dove, symbolical of the Holy Spirit, by some mechanical contrivance is made to light a lamp before the sacred image at this corner, and on the high altar of the cathedral.'¹²

As may be inferred from these hints of Pazzi piety, Francesco's plan to assassinate Lorenzo and Giuliano would at first have been unconnected to killing them in the *Duomo's* nave – or across the *piazza* from the small church where Niccolò went for his Latin lessons. Nor were their assassinations scheduled for Easter Sunday, to avoid the possibility that Sixtus, along with the rest of the conspirators, might be accused of adding 'the crime of sacrilege to murder.' Nor were they to occur in Florence. Francesco's plan to murder the brothers in January, 1478, however, and not far out of town, either at Jacopo de'Pazzi's villa in Montughi, or at Lorenzo's in Fiesole, fell through when Giuliano failed to keep a dinner date at Montughi with the waiting assassins. He had injured his leg in a riding accident. The fact that he and Lorenzo were willing to show up at all, though, indicates their ignorance of the plotting against them.

Probably for these reasons the drama set for the *Duomo* on 26 April 1478 had already acquired, if just for its inventors, an aura of anticlimax. Despite the threat of public mayhem, a generous amount of overexposure and quarrelling may have drained it of any solid prospect of success, while from the start it seemed a shrunk, sleazy idea, or power-grabbing snagged on a cheap back-alley punch-up.

For others, though, the Pazzis' assault on politics and history would have seemed incalculably horrifying. The two victims, the hundreds of witnesses and thousands of indirect witnesses, among them Niccolò and his family, who were to learn the facts of the bloody affair almost at once – for reasons quickly

to become clear – in reality faced what would have seemed a spewing terrorism pouring out of an obscure, nightmarish and possibly spiritual disorder.

Also figuring into the crowds at the great cathedral, and the dull, sallow light of its vast nave, was the anomaly that Giuliano was not eager to go out that morning. His injured leg still annoyed him. He might not have gone at all, except that two of the most enthusiastic potential assassins, Francesco de'Pazzi and Bernardo Bandini Baroncelli, a fortune-hunter who owed the Pazzi money, returned to the Medici Palace to get him. By then Lorenzo had left for the Easter services. He was accompanied by Raffaele Riario, the Pope's seventeen-year-old nephew and himself a newly appointed cardinal. It was agreed that the two brothers ought to be killed together to guarantee the coup's success.¹³

Francesco frisked Giuliano for concealed weapons as he limped along the street, disguising his treacherous inspection as an affectionate hug. As the two men reached the cathedral, which looked wan and sickly inside except for a few chandelier-lit areas, and was packed with Easter-worshippers, with Niccolò and his family probably among them, the divine service rising into the silvered semi-darkness, Francesco led Giuliano to a spot at the north flank of the choir. A nearby door opened onto the street: he had become attentive to his escape-route. Lorenzo stood far off, on the other side of the altar.

The assassins were to attack at eleven, at the sound of the sacristy bell. Two priests recruited into the conspiracy, Maffei and Stefano – Maffei was eager to avenge himself on Lorenzo for the massacre at his home city of Volterra – were to strike then as well. Even as these manoeuvres came off, however, none produced its proper effect.

The bell was to be their signal: it was to distract Lorenzo and Giuliano, who would be absorbed in their prayers. Once they had been killed, Archbishop Salviati, another conspirator, and yet another, Jacopo di Poggio Bracciolini, in charge of a cadre of armed men slipping their concealed swords and daggers from under their cloaks, would race to the Palazzo della Signoria. There, at the centre of government, they were to seize the actual reins of power.¹⁴

The well-known Jacopo di Poggio Bracciolini's role in what happened must still – after centuries – rankle as an enigma, and because of his influence on Niccolò, ought to be taken into account. The son of Poggio Bracciolini, a well-known scholar and the author of wildly obscene tales – his *Facezie* were to influence folk literature and other types of fiction straight across Europe, including in

Germany the hilarious, world-famous *Tales of Till Eulenspiegel* – Jacopo was an accomplished translator and had recently re-established good relations with Lorenzo after a dispute. It remains reasonable, though unproved, that he was attracted to the Pazzi Conspiracy by republican ideals. The poet Angelo Poliziano, a Medici supporter present in the cathedral during what immediately turned into a roaring brawl, dismissed this possibility with a disgusted shrug: Bracciolini was evil and would have done anything, even kill a friend, for advantage. Poliziano's contempt, however, seems even less convincing than the likelihood of Jacopo's duplicity, which contradicts any idealistic goals.¹⁵

Whatever twisted motives flickered through the *Duomo* as the sacristy bell rang out, their cruelty, along with the ugliness of the plan itself, went horribly awry.

Francesco de'Pazzi flung himself in a frenzy on Giuliano, stabbing him at least nineteen times, and in so ferocious an outburst of passion that he stabbed himself in the leg. The misaimed attack followed Baroncelli's 'Take that, traitor!' His dismal shriek followed a plunging of his dagger into Giuliano's head, with such vigour that it slammed through his skull.

Lorenzo did somewhat better as his brother fell sprawling, gasping and bleeding to death just past the altar. He fended off the two priests who took their swipes at him, acting with the same swiftness of calculation which had set him apart before that morning and would continue to do so throughout his life.¹⁶

Nine years earlier, on 3 December 1469, and then at the precocious age of twenty-one, on the death of his father Piero, and just as the poet-diplomat-partygoer prepared to assume control of the Medicis' financial and political empire, he had displayed a shrewdness whose subtlety astonished everyone, announcing that 'contrary to my age and involving great responsibilities and perils, I [take up my legacy] with great reluctance, and only to preserve our friends and possessions, for in Florence things can go badly for the rich if they don't run the state.'¹⁷

By now he seemed even more confident. Luca Landucci, a merchant and diarist, along with other eye-witnesses, records that while Lorenzo took a neck wound from one of his two ambushing assailants, he coolly unsheathed his sword, parried their weapons and managed to get away by racing into the sacristy.

Other bits of the fraying conspiracy now unravelled completely. Jacopo di Poggio's attempt to seize power at the Palazzo della Signoria failed when as

he arrived the few officials on the spot became nervous and hastily locked themselves away in a secure room.

Once he heard that Lorenzo had escaped, Jacopo de'Pazzi's fumbling attempt to save the day by mounting his horse and galloping from one *piazza* to the next, shouting '*Popolo e libertà*', and thus trying to rouse the people against the Medici, produced nothing except his unpleasant discovery that with nobody joining him he had better flee not only his *palazzo* but Florence itself.¹⁸ Federico da Montefeltro's troops, waiting beyond the walls, were never brought in, and dispersed.

Each of these glimpses of failure, however, only pointed to the even more heartless drama to come. Landucci's diary entries reveal the spiralling dread, developing into mob violence, that now swept the streets and was likely to have been witnessed by Niccolò:

The city was up in arms, in the *Piazza* and at Lorenzo de'Medici's house [to which he was brought]. And numbers of men on the side of the conspirators were killed in the *Piazza*; among others a priest of the bishop's ..., his body ... quartered and the head cut off, and ... the head ... stuck on the top of a lance, and carried about Florence the whole day, and one quarter of his body was carried on a spit all through the city, with the cry of: 'Death to the traitors!'¹⁹

Later, during the night, some of the dead themselves appeared in the high windows of the Palazzo della Signoria, whose panes overlooked the cobblestoned square where *parlamenti* of qualified male citizens (or property owners) of the Florentine state were held on occasion. The larger windows seemed to glisten with a dance of corpses.

It had been choreographed to astonish the inhabitants still up and about and massed below, with a display of vengeful justice. It would unveil through its gruesomeness an undisturbed if threatened civil order, in a series of tableaux that everyone, even including boys and girls, was to remember for many years to come, if not for the rest of their lives:

That evening they hanged Jacopo, son of Messer Poggio, from the windows of the *Palagio de' Signori*, and likewise the Bishop of Pisa, and Franceschino de' Pazzi, naked; and about twenty men besides, some at the *Palagio de' Signori*, and others at the *Palagio dei Podestà*, and at the *Casa del Capitano*, all at the windows,

in each case leaving the body dangling as per Florentine and European custom, its relaxing bag of flesh slapping against the walls and forecasting worse to come over the succeeding days, as when on

[the 27th] they hanged Jacopo Salviati ... and the other Jacopo, also at the windows, and many others of the cardinal and the bishop. And the day after that (28 April 1478), Messer Jacopo de'Pazzi was captured at Belforte. And that evening of the 28th, about 23 in the Evening (7 p.m.), Messer Jacopo de'Pazzi and Renato de' Pazzi were hanged,

with the total of those put to death through the first week of public executions coming to at least ninety-one.²⁰

Even more typical of the violent displays to which Niccolò and Florence as a whole, including other children, were systematically exposed, or about whose horrors they would have heard, were the savageries visited on the body of Jacopo de'Pazzi.

In its swinging about there seemed to emerge some of the more macabre shadows of the age itself, or the disconnection at times of the actors from any code of ethics – and this, paradoxically, as Lorenzo began to busy himself with reasserting his powers and dominance. Astonishingly, his greatest influence almost at once began to develop out of his ravishing commitment to aesthetics. As a fêted though secretly failed banker, he briskly promoted the careers of some of Italy's finest sculptors and painters, with the result that while the urban slaughter continued, he found himself trumpeted as '*il magnifico*':

17th May. At about 20 in the evening [4 p.m.] some boys disinterred [Jacopo's body: it had first been buried in the cathedral of Santa Croce, then dug up and reburied close to the city wall] and dragged it through Florence by the piece of rope ... still round its neck; and when they came to the door of his house, they tied the rope to the door-bell, saying: 'Knock at the door!' ... And ... they went to the Ponte al Rubiconte and threw it into the river... . And as it floated down the river, always keeping above the surface [no doubt buoyed by its gases], the bridges were crowded with people to watch it pass. And another day ... the boys pulled it out ... and hung it on a willow, and ... beat it, and threw it back into the Arno.²¹

However many boys tossed Jacopo's body back into the river – or whether it was not thrown in by city officials out to get rid of it – scuffles over his body, as over the mangled bodies of other conspirators, ran on for months as they were

hunted down and captured (several months later Leonardo was sketching the hanged body of Bernardo di Bandino).

In part as a response to the savagery, an enraged Pope Sixtus chose to launch a spluttering and eventually dangerous war against Lorenzo and Florence itself. The war aside, if only for the moment, it should be understood that among Florence's *polis* of 42,000, as the spate of hangings and other killings became daily more conspicuous, Niccolò was surely accumulating a cogent instruction in the basest aspects of governmental power, in the uses of symbolic brutality and in the slaughter that may seem congenial to sitting judges.²²

Torture and execution might be boon companions. Advertising their connection might amount to sound governance. Openness alone might distinguish executions from mere murder, while all four – torture, execution, advertising and openness – might be understood as buttressing the legitimacy of the state.

A Boyhood Excursion

One year later, during the summer of 1479, Bernardo dispatched his eldest son into a countryside colourful with flowers and farms, the district just north of Florence called the Mugello, chiefly to avoid the plague.

The scourge of Europe, as it was known since its epidemic Italian eruption at Genoa in 1348 – before that, it had raced through China, killing tens of millions – the usually deadly and always agonizing disease, whose origins many attributed to the wrath of God, saw entire populations of cities, towns and villages decimated or at least diminished by up to fifty per cent during its repeated outbreaks.

A recent outbreak, which had poured through Florence at the beginning of the fifteenth century, or a few decades before Niccolò's birth, had eliminated over half the 90,000-plus residents. By 1479, the city had scarcely recovered.

At its most infectious peak, Boccaccio had noted in his *Decameron* its catastrophic effects on Florentine society. These were even worse than the personal anguish of pain and death: 'the reverend authority of divine and human law had almost crumbled and fallen into decay, for its ministers and executors, like other men, had either died or sickened, or had been left so entirely without assistants that they were unable to attend to their duties. As a result everyone had licence to do as he saw fit.'¹

The ushering in of a barbarism more rampant, unpredictable and grisly than the disease itself stood in contrast to the more familiar sorts of ugly social behaviour, which might, as many understood, be state-sponsored. It led thousands of citizens and others to flee as society itself seemed to disintegrate.

Boccaccio reported on women offering themselves to anyone, on boys to men, on thieves to their scavenging chances in the vacant manorial houses, on masters to servants. Acts of treachery achieved a morbid fascination in popular literature, as in Boccaccio's stories. Pathologies more vicious than the toxic expressions of greed, envy, poverty and murder became bizarrely interesting.

As many understood, the plague had no respect for class struggles – only for death, and it accosted both guilty and innocent with an incomprehensible, Jobian unfairness. Plunged into eddies of neglected laws, families, guilds and other social groups cracked and fell apart. Virtue turned into vice. Altruism seemed suicidal, selfishness philanthropic, rejection hygienic.

Substantial reductions of human contacts were seen from the start as valuable in reducing the contagion. Thousands understood that no matter what the mechanism of the spread of the disease – and nearly none grasped that its vampiristic appetite required strewing about the fleas borne by rats – any congress with the stricken, whether by touching, breathing, dressing, washing and kissing, might be one's last.

Suspicious flared against those who refused to flee, or to pile more logs and furniture on the useless, ubiquitous, smoke-pouring bonfires imagined as offering protection against 'plague-breezes' and 'plague-winds' (the word 'germ' was not used). Unscrupulous lawyers profited from taking down by dictation the wills of people detecting on their bodies the telltale swellings, which were followed in hours by black blotches, boils and terminal writhings.

As Boccaccio also reported and as occurred during subsequent outbreaks, the bodies of the middle class and rich were soon shovelled by their hundreds into mass-burial pits. The bodies of the poor lay scattered about the streets. Most priests were dead. The cemeteries were packed to overflowing.²

By 1479 a fear of new outbreaks which could prove even more appalling had lingered over the city for over half a century. The spectre of an earthly Inferno haunted the urban Renaissance brain, along with the ghosts of anarchy, violence and mistrust. To many, history had long come to seem a wicked jest, or an idea not uneasily propped up by Christian convictions.

Bernardo seems to have caught the disease himself and survived as one among the fortunate fifty per cent. On 30 June 1479, while returning to Florence from the family's farms at Sant'Andrea in Percussina, he fell ill. He began to worry that, as others about him were shivering with what looked like plague, he must have it himself.³ Despite this likelihood, and aware that proper diagnoses were often unavailable and that many of those infected did not die, he realized that all hope ought not reasonably to be abandoned.

As per his practical habits in personal matters, he sketched out in his *libro di ricordi* the steps that he regarded as essential to dealing with his problem, along with arrangements to get three of his four children out of town. Niccolò, then

ten, Totto, four, and Margherita, twelve, were sent to their uncle's country house in the Mugello hills (Primavera, Niccolò's elder sister, then fourteen, seems to have stayed behind with her parents).

Bernardo next hired several doctors at the extraordinary price of a single florin each. He provided the first with a testable urine sample, which his cousin, Buoninsegna, who kept his distance out in the street, received through one of the barred windows of the Machiavelli *palazzo*. He too was paid a florin.

Bernardo's physicians treated their lawyer-patient in the ordinary ignorant ways, with debilitating bleedings, plus helpful lancings of the abscessed boils. Syrups and honey-spiced drinks were mixed, herbal ointments rubbed into the excrescent sores. A barber, or *cerusico* (*chirurgo inetto*), who despite his title was given training in medical procedures, including surgery, dropped in with leeches. Their dainty blood-sucking possessed the unacknowledged virtue of sterility.

Over several weeks, or into July, as the doctors' efforts, or perhaps a natural recovery in Bernardo's case, seemed to work, other members of the Machiavelli clan fared far worse. Bernardo chronicles without comment the deaths of a number of his relatives, noting that these continued into August, when the epidemic tapered off.⁴

Interestingly, Bartolomea, Niccolò's mother, seems to have been unaffected. An unsubstantiated family legend credits her with piety, and even with composing religious songs or poems. No trace of them survives, or any hint of when they might have been written. A suggestion persists that they were kept in the family library into the nineteenth century. Bartolomea's strength of belief, however, and the role of her sacred poetry in appeasing what thousands took to be a divine judgement expressed through ferocious physical tortures, are unknown.

It should also be added that when she married Bernardo, as a woman in her thirties, she had already been married, possibly as early as eighteen, to an apothecary, Niccolò Girolamo di Niccolò di Benizzi. He had died in 1457, leaving her the mother of a daughter, Lionarda, who seems not to have survived.⁵

Despite Bartolomea's somewhat uneven background, it was to her brother Giovanni Nelli's safe-seeming estates in Montebuiano, in the Mugello hills, that Niccolò and Bernardo's other children were now sent. As Bernardo fondly recalled, Niccolò wore light summer clothes. He took along a coat and short tunic against the cooler nights.

Niccolò also preceded the other children, with Totto and Margherita following by mule a couple of days later. Totto rode wrapped in his father's bed and sheets, in a basket strapped to the flank of one of the mules.⁶

The glorious countryside around Montebuiano could not have been more agreeable. Its imposing hills spread out rumply, green and rough, as they do now, even if today they are more accessible by smoother roads.

Ample and comfortable vineyards, sporting hundreds of staked rows of strung and (in July) minuscule grapes, unrolled over many miles. They often seemed to run vertically, into a steepness twisted here and there among narrow dells that undulated below the perpetually blue-chambered sky.

In summer a gentle rain seldom fell among the hills' scorched parts. Wallows of plane trees, oaks, yews, beeches and white firs hung about like so many parasols and ushers. The olive trees seemed to have dawdled for centuries. At night, a lone wolf might lope by, foxes more often, trotting between the moonlit vines and hedges.

During summer, scattered flocks of sheep browsed among the truncated leas and tough hillocks, bearing the promise of the valuable wool trade through a taxing sunlight. Another promise, of cheese extracted from the freshest milk, was in preparation among the wandering goats and cattle. Cows were valued far more for dairy goods and leather than, as even in those days in parts of England, red meat.

To those aware of these age-old, agricultural circumstances – the majority – the countryside also yielded an intense, important hint of myth and magic. From ancient times the half-venerated earth had been transformed by the history and religion of its inhabitants, or its estate-owners, farmers, blacksmiths, cobblers, yeomen, wives, mothers, weavers, chandlers, children, ploughmen, priests, huntsmen and carpenters.

For aeons too, unlike other spots across the planet, the legend-nurtured hills had done a good deal more than to offer up a collection of soils, or greywacke scuffing through loam and rising through the occasional twist of summer dust. Over two-score centuries, these path-strewn dales, glens and rocky summits had been folded, pressed, seeded and nursed by a great many worshipful, fantasizing fingers.

Following the ancient subjugation of the Etruscans, who had introduced their schools of gods into this expansive, vertical-green theatre, the imperial and educated classes of the ancient Romans, adopting various Etruscan beliefs

as their own, had settled in and coached, or so it seemed, their gods into joining them.

They too had admired the hills, but in their own way, through the verse of their epic rural poet, Virgil, who had hailed from not far off, near Mantua. His by now fourteen-centuries-old intimate *Georgics* mingled sound advice to farmers and bee-keepers with descriptions of the Italian farmland spreading out below the Mugello's brook-veined precipices.

In his *Georgics*, the chunky meadows opened southward. They bent toward the parapets and citadels of Rome, but in supple hexameters and through by now famous depictions of predictable, reassuring autumns, winters and springs, to be succeeded and elaborated by months of golden, crop-improving sunlight.

Virgil's phrases, sensible, philosophical and even celestial, as much juicy as admired, had everywhere been committed to memory, and not just by those who, as in ancient Roman times and for well over a thousand years by Niccolò's fifteenth century, might as schoolboys have immersed themselves in the discipline of a classical or humanist education.

Drawn to Latin himself, and hearkening to Virgil's speaking pictures, to cite the *simpatico* phrase of Sir Philip Sidney, who would himself not be born until the next century, Niccolò had probably not yet read Virgil's *Georgics*. He would have heard of them. Virgil's quartet of poems was set out according to a plan of one lengthy poem per season. Niccolò would have read snippets, and probably more, of the *Aeneid*, the Roman poet's stately, landscape-dominated epic centring on the violent invention of the ancient world's most politically suave empire.

He would thus have recognized about him, as if somehow intended to discover and rediscover this wild yet tamed and re-imagined countryside, the older, god-riddled world within it. Along with farming practices little changed since then, its mythic reality persisted. Niccolò had been encouraged by his teachers and his father to see wherever he went the still capable Roman ghosts amid the extant glimmerings of their lost yet somehow immortal culture:

the ploughman hammers the hard tooth

Of the blunt plough: one chap will fashion troughs from a tree-trunk,
Another brand his cattle or number his sacks of grain.⁷

His growing knowledge of the fixed orb of the Earth on which he lived,

with the heavens circling above it – these wrapped as much for him in a pagan Roman antiquity as in his Renaissance-Christian modernity – would have seemed richer, more intelligible when viewed through the poet's eyes:

Wherefore the golden sun commands an orbit measured
 In fixed divisions through the twelve-fold signs of the universe.
 Five zones make up the heavens: one of them in the flaming
 Sun glows red forever, for ever seared by his fire:
 Round it to right and left the furthermost zones extend,
 Blue with cold, ice-bound, frozen with black blizzards:
 Between these and the middle one, weak mortals are given
 Two zones by the grace of God ...
 Hence we foreknow the weather of the uncertain sky,
 The time to reap or sow,
 The time that's best for lashing the treacherous sea with oars,
 And launching an armed fleet.⁸

And during summer itself, doubling the ancient-Roman depth of the landscape, and close by in the hamlet of Cafaggiolo, there also remained, as if to appease his modern curiosity, a reminder of the new political world, the Villa Medicea.

Its *pièce de résistance* was its castle, restored in the fifteenth century and converted into a summer residence by Cosimo the Elder. It had been remodelled and was used as a summer getaway by Lorenzo de' Medici, and even more often after the recent attempt on his life.

Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), the mathematician and philosopher praised for his translations of Plato, including his *Timaeus*, was a frequent guest at the Medici villa. So too was the renowned logician Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), Marcello's former student.⁹ Both did more than earn their keep at the feasts arranged for relaxed summer evenings by adding to the sum of smart conversation. Everyone's Tuscan accents seemed to gain a new sheen from their debates on the meaning of history or the latest insights of natural philosophy, understood today as the hard sciences.

A broad enthusiasm for the history of ideas was at fever pitch among the educated, and despite both philosophers' odd meanderings into the obscure corners of medieval astrology and amulet reading, it was generally agreed that their conversation sparkled. For the most part, too, it consisted of rational

speculation, something less common among their gorgeously dressed, empirically oriented yet superstitious audiences of noblemen, noblewomen, politicians and merchants.

If peace mingled with good sense at the Villa Medicea, the hemmed-in, night-blackened villages not far off seemed as if dug into the countryside. They were linked by scurfy roads, since Roman times stripped of their lead metalling. Swathed in a virginal dark once the sun went down, away from the tapers lit at Lorenzo's castle windows and at those of a few other houses in the evenings, the isolation of the sylvan world admitted nearly no lights with the residents abed.

If in the hamlets and neighbourhoods of recent centuries the natural world's separation from human inhabitants is harder to discover, it may be worth recalling that in Niccolò's *quattrocento* mechanical or electronic sounds were unknown, or as incomprehensible as plastic, tea, coffee, television screens, aircraft engines, iPods and car alarms. The creak of steel, mechanical repetitions, oil-fuelled chinks or clangs, had not been heard, and were as unknown as screens full of space-angled text messages.

By day and night the spice-packed air, bearing its weights of sage, mint and rosemary, wherried by in a freshness as thick as that of the growing vegetables, or as by daylight the sounds of the cabinet-makers, caners, potters, tailors, spinners and dyers, perfecting their individual products, each different from the next, as for instance those of the glass-blowers with their uneven bottles and spidered, silvered mirrors sold to their better-off customers.

In an epoch prior to steam power and the Industrial Revolution, when the universe seemed a finite affair, and even manageable according to *Fortuna*, personal daring and divine influence, *manufatto* still retained the sense of made by hand, and *prodotto manufatto* the actual impression of the craftsman's thumb.

The Lost Years

Niccolò flickers in and out of Bernardo's *ricordanza*, or his diary of domestic events important to him, until 1487, when for unknown reasons Bernardo stopped keeping it. At times Bernardo's entries reveal details of his son's childhood which seem essential to understanding his emerging confidence: a smattering of clues showing how at first the boy, and then the man, perhaps wandering into a room, or moving down a road, spent a solitary or a convivial day, or even a few minutes.

After the defeat of the Pazzi, the odour of corruption, unmentioned by Bernardo, perhaps because its implications of ethical collapse had no direct effect on him, his wife and his children, began to infiltrate the Florentine air. The near-total freedom of the rescued ruler, no matter how much in principle he might seem restrained by a revered constitution, knew no bounds. Lorenzo might do as he wished.

Still, the situation remained a paradox. If his greedy financial practices seemed largely unrestrained, any blame for the failure of just one foreign adventure – as for example a war – might be unlimited. The despot, more than the bureaucrat or elected official, no matter how well protected by testy sycophants, could rapidly attract a mass of public scorn, with all its attendant risks that he might be deposed.

An important problem in Lorenzo's case was that the Medici, who fancied themselves master-bankers, had begun to dissipate their resources in the expensive war unleashed by Sixtus and his allies. Chief among them remained King Ferrante of Naples.

Florence also languished under the restrictions of a papal injunction of excommunication for its republican defiance in seizing, torturing and executing treacherous priests and papal emissaries. Sixtus had 'flooded all Italy' with letters and whispered accusations. These mocked and denounced what he saw as the Florentine repudiation of God's legitimate representative on Earth.

Medici banks in Rome and Naples, ineptly run by Lorenzo in any case, were quickly forced to shut their doors. A dispute over Lorenzo's attempt to borrow money for his Florentine war chest from his bank managers elsewhere, which had been provoked by their refusal, led him in a fit of pique to shut down, quite on his own, the Medici banks in Bruges and Milan.

His blunder only intensified an equally self-defeating wish to pilfer tax revenues and other funds from Florence itself, to the tune of an impressive 75,000 florins over the next couple of years.¹

A Medici legacy likewise fell prey to his avarice. As guardian of the two underage sons of his father's cousin, Pierfrancesco de' Medici, who had died in 1476, Lorenzo had access to their cash reserves. Between May and October, 1479, this amount, or nearly 55,000 florins, easily found its way into his pockets.²

The war meanwhile veered from bad to worse. Mercenary skirmishes evolved into fair-sized battles, hard on the heels of successive attempts at military intimidation. No one worried too much if paid-up soldiers flaunted rather than used their weapons, but it now seemed that familiar shilly-shallying mercenary tricks, ruses, feints and jabs had turned into an authentic conflict. Behind the menacing, clumsy artillery barrages, the residential populations of the cities and towns in the Florentine Republic found themselves increasingly drawn into the expectation of an immense assault, arousing fears for their independence and lives.

Indictments and humiliations also abounded. They seemed everywhere matched by suspicions spurring revenge-seeking. Demonizing poems, distributed as broadsides in the streets of Republican cities and towns, played a seditious role. If the mercenaries were driven by greed, slews of citizens surrendered to crazed passions.

What was increasingly clear was that in terms of anxiety and thoughtless responses, Florence's diverse groups, among them the Machiavelli, were becoming afraid and involved. As early as July 1478, when the war began, Landucci's diary cites battles in which citizens were killed and prisoners taken, both 'men and women of all classes.' By December, as the pillagings and burnings seesawed across a few thousand square miles of the Florentine territories – ranging as far east as Venice and as far west as Pisa – the fighting and slaughter had become inextricable from the latest eruptions of the plague, which as always was perceived as a type of divine vengeance directed at sinners ('the plague was ... causing much mortality; it pleased God to chastise us').³

In the summer of 1479, Landucci himself fled Florence for a bit, more in fear of the disease than the war, as Niccolò was sent to the Mugello hills for the same reason.

By September, Bernardo, who in his quasi-diary often ignores military and political events, records the capture and wrecking of a Florentine fortress in southern Tuscany, anxious about its nearness to his family properties in Sant'Andrea in Percussina. He orders his *brigata*, or family-*cum*-workers, to return to Florence, getting them out of harm's way and making sure that his flocks of sheep are relocated to safety.⁴

A masterstroke seemed crucial to breaking what looked like an emerging military stalemate that might implode into a Florentine surrender. In December, 1479 Lorenzo set out to provide it.

To make matters clearer, it must be noted that daily life in the city had long since begun to be affected by rolling cannon, rusted armour and the leather of cavalry saddles drenched in mud. The treasury was bare. The wool trade, fundamental to the Republic's financial independence, seemed as impossible to keep up as to defend with unsuccessful sallies. The introduction of a startling new weapon, a primitive, inaccurate handgun, with 2,000 of some 8,000 Milanese foot soldiers using it in a single victorious battle, suggested by the autumn of 1479 that both sides might anticipate additional threats of an advanced, technological sort, despite the tenuous alliance between Milan and Florence.⁵

Even if a likely battlefield disaster failed to develop, the plague itself might wreak greater havoc than ever, bloated by the general malaise and economic hardships. In his customary flamboyant style, therefore, Lorenzo seized on a pre-Christmas moment to arrange a conciliatory meeting with King Ferrante of Naples, his primary enemy. Face to face negotiations might end the carnage, even if attempting them also meant risking his life. Rather than slipping off to a minor port on the Tuscan coast to take a discreet ship south to the Neapolitan capital, he consulted with his Milanese counterparts, as they did with theirs in Naples. The Neapolitan response was somewhat better than discouraging. He would be welcome, though his journey might run along improved lines if he embellished it with gifts: he ordered them at once.

From King Ferrante's point of view, the following two months of negotiations, after the Medici leader's majestic entrance into the old city, amid flocking, joyful crowds and grave flashings of steel and silk, had less to do with putting

an end to the war than with convincing everyone of a Florentine defeat. Tough bargaining produced concessions. Money and slices of Republican territory were cheerlessly given up. As Lorenzo acquiesced in his losses, his success at home seemed to grow by the hour. It became clear that he had averted a far worse military and political débacle.

A crucial moment came during the following August, when the Turks staged an invasion by flotilla at Otranto. The Pope's hostility now abated. Like everyone else, Sixtus understood the importance of setting aside intra-Italian quarrels to confront a common 'infidel' enemy. The war faded away to an end, and by December 1481, the Medici bank at Rome had reopened.⁶

A year earlier, in 1480, Niccolò Machiavelli, by then eleven, had begun learning arithmetic and elementary business accounting (*l'abacho*) in a first venture into the less poetic terrain of applied mathematics. These efforts complemented his Latin studies. His younger brother, Totto, now five, had also started in on Latin, though over the coming year both saw their education transferred to a third tutor (for Niccolò), ser Pagolo Sasso da Ronciglione. Pagolo perhaps taught Niccolò the rudiments of classical Greek, though he seems to have shown little interest in it and no evidence survives of his retaining any.

By now, too, according to Bernardo, his twelve-year-old son had begun to write brief Latin compositions and to translate into Latin from the Italian (*'fa de' latini'*). He read the standard general children's history, Justinus's *Epitome*, in a parchment manuscript version borrowed by his father from a neighbour, one ser Piero, who according to his appellation 'ser' would have been a clergyman or notary; 'messer' remained a title reserved for jurists, including judges, and knights: Bernardo himself was usually addressed as 'messer'.⁷

Niccolò's new tutor, a priest, ser Pagolo [Paolo], ran his own school at the *Duomo* and taught the clergy there, or at Santa Maria Reparata, as it was also called. His *Duomo* pupils were often the sons of some of the most prominent and influential families in Florence, including many well connected to the city's government. Pagolo himself had been recognized for considerable intellectual accomplishments. As a translator of Virgil, Lucretius, Ovid and Tibullus, he assisted his students in parsing sessions, rhetorical analyses and the rote Latin learning of the ancient Greek philosophers in translation and above all of ancient historians and political writers such as Livy and Cicero.

The boys themselves, who ranged in age from twelve to about fifteen, comprised an intellectually elite group: other boys their age were consigned to

what were designated as arithmetic-orientated schools. Among Pagolo's pupils were Pietro Crinito and Michele Verino, soon to achieve precocious renown as poets. Michele, who died at eighteen, in 1487, had already published in Latin his famous *disticha*, tidy, witty inventions comparable to the two-line epigrammatic verse of the Roman poet Martial. His death was mourned by the leading Florentine humanists, among them Cristoforo Landino, himself the author of an admired commentary on Dante's *Commedia*. Landino saw Michele as a noble spirit who had been cheated by *Fortuna* out of a brilliant literary career.⁸

Knowledge of Niccolò's comings and goings, of his doings, now begins to flicker, go dim and brighten over the next several years, especially as guesswork unsupported by data scarcely helps. He next crops up in Bernardo's *libro* in 1481, assigned to deliver more or less monthly payments in cash for his father (Bernardo paid in kind as well, with barrels of wine and bottles of vinegar: the expense was a big one for him) to a cloth-merchant for portions of his daughter Primavera's trousseau.⁹

Her wedding, to the twenty-three-year-old Francesco Vernacci – she was fifteen – was arranged in stages, as was usual, accompanied by inter-paternal negotiations over her dowry. In Primavera's case these stages, as was also usual, extended over a few years. The last followed the actual ceremony, scheduled for Sunday, 15 June 1483. It in turn was succeeded by the consummation of the marriage at her family's house after a celebratory wedding dinner that night. The final arrangements were capped on 6 July by her participation in the official bridal procession to her husband's home.

Primavera's bridal gown seems to have been luxurious and expensive. It consisted of a *cotta*, or elegant blue goat- or camel's hair undergarment, plus a *giachetta*, or blue silk outer garment. These ran her not-at-all-rich father well over 900 florins, to which, if one wishes to estimate the cost of the entire wedding, must be added linens and bedding, new clothes and two cradles, plus her portion of the accumulated *monte* (over 500 florins), or the bride's dowry money, invested by Bernardo over many years in a city-administered fund, a custom in practical-minded Florence, together with what he recalled as his modest outlay for the wedding dinner.¹⁰

Niccolò also reappears in his father's *libro* in an entry for 21 June 1486: at seventeen and with Bernardo off at Sant'Andrea in Percusina, he seems happy enough to deliver a payment of '3 bottles of red wine and a bottle of vinegar' to a local *cartolaio* for the binding – after eleven years – of Bernardo's copy of Livy's *3 Decades* ('*le Deche di Livio*'), given him for making his valuable index. Even

after the long wait the binding turned out to be solid and elegant but hardly exceptional: wood boards half-covered in leather, with two clasps. Simplicity belied its preciousness.¹¹

It is unclear whether Niccolò ever went to university, and if so, how or where, though he knew a great many who did, including a number of renowned scholars and professors. Even if he chose not to become a professional scholar, his admiration for textual and historical detective work shines out in ways that rapidly became evident, though his immediate educational path after his early school years remains baffling if not unclear.

Tantalizingly, Bernardo's *libro di ricordi* breaks off at just the moment, in 1487, when he may have started attending lectures at the financially run-down but vigorous *Studio*, Florence's first university, dating from 1321, with its *studio humaniora*, or well-trained faculty of scholars uncovering facets of humanist thought. He might even have attended the Republic's newer university of Pisa. This had been paid for by Lorenzo de' Medici since 1473, and had specialized schools in law, medicine and theology, though the odds in favour of his enthusiasm for these narrower concentrations seem long (the law school had appealed to his father).

At the *Studio*, from 1480 to 1481 on, he might have heard the respected poet Angelo Poliziano on the technical underpinnings of ancient Greek and Latin eloquence. He might also have listened to Cristoforo Landino on ancient rhetoric and *poesia*, or Marsilio Ficino on the nuances of Platonism. Here too he might first have met the already famous lecturer and scholar Marcello Virgilio Adriani. Marcello was nine years his senior, a noted Latinist and the translator of Dioscorides' *Materia medica*, a massive first-century pharmacopoeia, or standard physician's bible. While his translations were less than perfect, his more modern political ambition to join the Signoria might have surfaced in conversation and sounded attractive.¹²

A single remark of Paolo Giovio, a clerical author as dishonest as he was hostile, but who knew Niccolò during the early 1490s, is all that remains as evidence connecting him with university studies. In Paolo's *Maximus*, a collection of crisp, arch lives of contemporary celebrities, he claims that Niccolò 'plucked the flowers of Greek and Latin' under Adriani's tutelage, presumably at the *Studio*, though the claim is unsubstantiated and a suspicious twilight lingers over its author.¹³

What is clear is that at around this time, or within a few years, and most

likely before 1494, and whether under a professor's guidance or not, Niccolò plunged into a scholarly enterprise of his own, copying out plays by the ancient Roman playwright Terence, as well as Lucretius's over 7,000-line poetic masterpiece, his *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things).¹⁴

These demanding efforts, which inevitably led into scholarly training, may be seen as banishing the educational shadows, not only because of what the act of copying must have taught him about style and fluency in Latin, and possibly Italian, or the skills essential to moving ahead in Florentine society in those days, and even into the city's political life, but also for the fascination of the works themselves.

In the light of Niccolò's 'disappearance' for almost ten of what have been described as his 'lost' years, roughly from 1487 on, more attention than usual needs to be paid to these copying efforts as keys to understanding his intellectual and artistic development.

Terence (c.185–post 160 BCE), as Niccolò came to know him, was the author of six surviving plays, among them *The Girl from Andros* and *The Self-Tormentor*. Influenced by earlier Greek drama, he was the first ancient Roman master of the bouncy rhetoric and banter of drawing-room comedy, or sexy, intimate, insulting, sleazy, entertaining foolishness. Lucretius (c.95–c.55 BCE) was the foremost ancient Roman master of philosophical empiricism, or the post-Platonic doctrine whose attractions he exhibited in a style both serene and brilliant, blending lucid, novel images with logic and plainness of phrasing.

Neither writer was much appreciated during his lifetime. Terence was derided as frivolously domestic by Julius Caesar, Lucretius dismissed by the anti-scientific Romans. Virgil had admired his breadth of vision in promoting the atomistic and genetic insights of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Among them was the principle of inherited biological characteristics. Such radical notions placed Lucretius so far ahead of his time as to make him seem a buffoon.

Terence had long been known to humanist and medieval scholars, though the first printing of his plays had taken place in Strasbourg only in 1470. Lucretius by contrast was forgotten. The *De rerum natura* was rescued from centuries of ignorant darkness in 1417, or a bit over seven decades earlier, by the author-scholar whose son was later executed for joining the Pazzi Conspiracy, the unflappable yet tenacious hunter after ancient manuscripts (he also discovered

lost works of Cicero and Quintilian), Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), apparently at a monastery in Fulda, in Germany.¹⁵

Both Roman authors would easily have appealed to Niccolò for their stylistic good taste, or humanistic liveliness, coupled with naturalism, an idea best understood in his day as an evidence-based approach to describing the physical world.

By the late fifteenth century, the influence of naturalism had been expanding for decades. This was especially the case among painters and sculptors, but the two ancient Roman poets (if a playwright as vivid as Terence is also considered a poet) had anticipated its basis of aesthetics and propositional truth in phenomenology, or the study of physical experiences, and this over sixteen hundred years earlier than almost anyone had thought possible.

Under their influence, Niccolò's humanist tendencies, or his education so far, began to veer down an interesting new path. Either that or his maturing inclination to depict and analyze the world from a naturalistic point of view received a powerful injection of intellectual vigour. As a copyist, he would have found compelling at least three among the scores of daring passages in Lucretius. These dealt with images, or the workings of the imagination, the foundations of political states and the plague.

Medieval attitudes toward the human imagination – or more precisely, mental images, or *imagines* – had been, and in his day remained, unflattering. All fantasies were considered self-delusions. They were ego-centred mirages rather than, as people today see them, whimsies, dreams, daydreams or attractive and exciting ways to reconfigure problems or experiences. Lucretius would have encouraged Niccolò to adopt a more modern understanding of images. It might prove a useful tool. His argument was that they induce vision, or what Newton in centuries to come would describe as a response of the optic nerve. As a result, they provoke perception. This becomes possible because both crude and refined *imagines* are shed by objects and enter the eye, enabling it to see. The more refined type of *imagines* in fact consists of

flimsy films from the surface of objects flying about in a great many ways in all directions. When these encounter one another in the air, they easily amalgamate, like gossamer or gold leaf... These ... penetrate through the chinks of the body and set in motion the delicate substance of the mind within and there provoke sensation.

And the reason? It lies – and herein resides some of the originality of the

Epicurean account of the universe – in the nature of the mind, or its nimbleness. The mind has an elastic quality which allows it to be much more than a static organ: ‘for the mind itself is delicate and marvellously mobile.’¹⁶

Put differently, from Lucretius’s Epicurean standpoint the mind, like the body, is not a thing but a process. It not only represents but constitutes a superior form of alertness. Even when the body is asleep, the mind maintains its antenna-like trembling, or manner of action, as do the universe’s atom-based, flighty particles and qualities, especially its most fundamental: those of emotional and sexual love. Love is to be understood as presiding over the welfare of living creatures. In combination with the underlying physical near-serenity of all phenomena, it sustains their renewal.

Despite his scorn of hedonism, therefore, his contempt of pleasure and his puritanical code of morality, Lucretius is unyielding in his conviction that Eros, conceived as a force, expresses a unifying process that often cannot help but triumph:

A woman deficient in beauty sometimes becomes the object of love. Often the woman herself, by humouring a man’s fancies and keeping herself fresh and smart, makes it easy for him to share his life with her. Over and above this, love is built up bit by bit by mere usage.¹⁷

His view of nations and politics glides along similar lines: any society is a form of action rather than a settled institution. It expresses ceaseless flux. The rise of kings thus leads to an inflation of greed, which in turn incites regicide:

[And] so the kings were killed. Down in the dust lay the ancient majesty of thrones, the haughty sceptres. The illustrious emblem of the sovereign head, dabbled in gore and trampled under the fist of the rabble, mourned its high estate. What once was feared so much is now downtrodden. So the conduct of affairs sank back into the turbid depths of mob rule, with each man struggling to win dominance and supremacy for himself. Then some men showed how to form a constitution, based on fixed rights and recognized laws. Mankind, worn out by a life of violence, came naturally to a society in which every individual was ready to gratify his anger by a harsher vengeance than is now tolerated by equitable laws. Ever since then the enjoyment of life’s prizes has been tempered by the fear of punishment. A man is enmeshed by his own violence and wrongdoing, which commonly recoil upon their author.¹⁸

And this condition too is seen as impermanent: only the serenity expressed by natural laws, or the deeper structure of the physical universe, aspires to permanence. More than this, no human being can separate him- or herself from his or her partly criminal nature, or the violence at the fringes of civilization:

It is not easy for one who breaks by his acts the mutual compact of social peace to lead a peaceful and untroubled life. Even if he hides his guilt from gods and men, he must feel a secret misgiving that it will not rest hidden forever. He cannot forget those oft-told tales of men betraying themselves by words spoken in dreams or delirium that drag out long-buried crimes into the daylight.¹⁹

War is likewise seen as unavoidable:

Mankind is perpetually the victim of a pointless and futile martyrdom, fretting life away in fruitless worries through failure to realize what limit is set to acquisition and to the growth of genuine pleasure. It is this discontent that has driven life steadily onward, out to the high seas, and has stirred up from the depths the surging tumultuous tides of war.²⁰

And behind human fluctuations lie other more powerful waves, the stupendous, ruling and often grim adjustments of nature, as when, inevitably,

some atmosphere that chances to be uncongenial to us is set in motion. The baleful air begins to creep. Like mist and cloud it glides, and wherever it comes, it sows disorder and change... . So, without warning, this new plague and pestilence falls upon the water or settles right in the growing wheat or on other human food or pasturage of animals; or else it remains suspended in the air itself so that, when we inhale the polluted atmosphere, we cannot help absorbing these foreign elements into our system.²¹

Astonishingly, given his belief in the ultimate prevalence of near-serenity, Lucretius concludes his epic description of creation, in which religion is dismissed as superstitious but necessary, with a detailed account of the horrors of the plague. These last moments of his grand and perhaps incomplete poem cannot but have impressed the young Machiavelli, who had recently seen or heard about similar horrors:

To no small extent the affliction was imported from the countryside into the city by the concentration there of the plague-stricken peasantry from every district, who crowded lanes and lodgings. Here, crammed within stifling walls, death piled high his heaps of victims... . Exposed in streets and public places you might see many a wasted frame, with limbs half lifeless, begrimed with filth and huddled under rags, dying in squalor with nothing to cover the bones or skin, well-nigh buried already in loathsome sores and dirt. Every hallowed shrine of the gods had been tenanted by death ... In this hour reverence and worship of the gods carried little weight: they were banished by the immediacy of suffering.²²

And the suffering, like everything else in Lucretius's Epicurean world, remains a shifting process, a type of unrolling action.

In the light of Niccolò's copying out the epic, therefore, his own humanistic training would at least have experienced a challenge. As seems likely, it may have begun to shift from its earlier antiquarian if adventurous philology into a way of seeing the world and what lay beyond and within it as a series of intersecting, endless changes. Ovid, after all, had earlier suggested to him something of the sort in his *Metamorphoses*, which he had read during his school days.

Poetry and the Medici

For the moment, though, his own poetry may have taken precedence. Two of his poems, or *canzoni*, have survived from his mid-twenties, and while terse and formulaic, they indicate in their implied apostrophes to Lorenzo de' Medici's son Giuliano that he and Niccolò were friends, and possibly close friends.

Both poems, which seem to date from 1492–94, and which are among the first surviving examples of his written voice, reveal him as before all else a literary man trained along humanist lines in the Latin classics, in Petrarch and Greek and Roman mythology. At the same time, an unexpected political fascination is implied, though not elaborated.

The two *canzoni* were gathered into a small volume that also included ten *canzoni* by Lorenzo de' Medici and one by Angelo Poliziano. Some pages were delightfully illustrated with sketches by Sandro Botticelli (1444–1510), among them at least one particularly apt sketch, given the pastoral genre of Niccolò's lines, of a nattily dressed shepherd seated on a sunlit rock and piping away before imperturbably foraging sheep.¹

The seeming pastoral innocence is deceptive, however, even as it would be a mistake to see either of Niccolò's *canzoni*, or many in the age-old pastoral tradition that reaches back into ancient Greek and Roman times, as unctuous or naïve:

O gift of so many gods, may you deign
to accept me among your loyal subjects;
may you not scorn to have me among your servants;
for my thoughts are meant
to please you – such is my sole desire –
I to obey, you to think of commanding me;
and though I stand surrounded by the throng
of these uncouth shepherds, when thinking of you

I soar above the vulgar.

You will see me soaring even higher once

I know that you accept my gift

which comes reciting your praises.

Beyond all this, whatever I have I give you:

the herd that you see is yours, and more,

this poor sheep of yours is what I am.

The flattery and pastoral conventions here aside, of the sheep, the shepherds and service to someone somehow adored, what emerges is an unexpected roughness ('the vulgar' or 'rozi pastor') and an underlying acknowledgement – scarcely flattery – of the solid class differences between the two men.

In the rigidly hierarchical world of Florence and Europe itself, and despite Niccolò's likely descent from an obscure noble family, Giuliano, though only a citizen, would have assumed a decisive prominence of rank. This quality of difference is no doubt more than difficult to grasp on its own terms these days, after centuries of politically inspired, democratically inclined revolutions, the idea of which was then scarcely known. The modern mind is better acquainted with class cruelties, and more typically adverts to instances of class-inspired slavery.

Equally difficult is grasping the extent to which in Niccolò's day class distinctions remained powerful reminders of what was assumed to be the hierarchical structure of the universe itself. Masses of people believed that to dismiss class was to dismiss a celestial order, an idea as irrational as drastic, and in the end impossible. This belief was to endure as a justification of social and economic exploitation over several hundred years, and even amid yearnings for greater social and economic equality. What seems sheer flattery in Niccolò's poem, in other words, and despite his friendship with Giuliano, might better be accepted as a gesture of recognition. It amounts to an acknowledgement their social differences.

A similar implication appears in the opening lines of the second poem, in which paradox surfaces fashionably:

All the shepherds abiding in these forests,

no matter their youth,

confide in you their differences.

You with your skilful and noble genius,

with your various methods and diverse strategies,
enable them to return happily to their fold.

You are merciful: if one of them is made miserable
by adverse *Fortuna* or by love,
with your sweet speech you restore him to contentment.

The laudatory emotions here seem uncomplicated, yet on reflection one realizes that the nature of the contentment is odd. If 'sweet speech' (*dolce parlar*) suffices to restore a utopian condition, still its enemy is described not merely as *Fortuna*, which ought to be expected, but as 'amore,' and in fact as positing a conflict inappropriate to the pastoral world: love conceived as an enemy belongs to a more ordinary, shabbier existence.

Similar mix-ups between a blissful pastoral world and a harsher real one tug at the poem's next tercets, which make up its central section and introduce its hero, Hyacinth, a stand-in for Giuliano de' Medici. In the ancient Greek myth, which Niccolò would have recalled from Ovid (*Metamorphoses* X, 162–219), the beautiful Spartan prince is depicted as beloved of Apollo. When he dies a far too early death, Apollo transforms his blood-droplets into his eponymous flower, on whose leaves there glistens with elegant ominousness the classical exclamation of despair, AI, AI:

Hyacinth, I remain one who celebrates your name
and to render it a memory for anyone alive
I carve it in every trunk, on every crag,
for your excellent and noted beauties
and your high deeds remain fit to honour
those who speak and write about you.

The heavens reveal their beneficial powers
by offering us so supreme a wonder,
by sharing such beauty with us;
every brilliant star fades before this one:
first as it looks at that head worthy
of any crown and any diadem,
next because the splendour governing that visage
and rippling through every aspect of itself
is Nature teaching us its worth and strength.

The rest you see through a natural accommodation:

that you hear the sound of his graceful sermons
which can animate a piece of marble, a stone.

The smoothness of the poem's astral, royal and other comparisons – with tree trunks gleaming as they are carved in the name of the beloved, and stars fading as marble comes to life, Pygmalion-style, in response to Hyacinth's voice – may even suggest physical intimacy, at least to the modern reader. The political aspects of the poet's love seem to blend with the erotic. By implication, therefore, the lines seem to refer to a gay or homosexual love.

The Hyacinth myth itself appears to support some such reading, as do several commentators, though without sufficient additional evidence. In the story's Ovidian version, the hero is beloved not only of Apollo but of Zephyr, whom he rejects. Raging with jealousy, the god of the west wind induces one of Apollo's quoits, hurled during a sporting match, to fly wildly about and slam into Hyacinth's head, killing him.

No known circumstances suggest that Giuliano was passionately entangled in a similar or parallel way, or indicate that Niccolò sets out in this poem to echo the whole myth, rather than simply to allude to relevant parts of it. Indeed, his verses soon become a paean to Apollo, and make no reference, however slight, to what was even then regarded with self-conscious horror as 'the Florentine vice':

Helped so much by your grand worthiness,
O sacred Apollo, and by your power, I seek
to invest it in honouring your Hyacinth.

The emphasis here, as through to the end, lies not on sex, as seems plain, or even on an ancient Roman idea of noble friendship – *amicitia* – as much as on fame itself or, more narrowly, on a nod to the resuscitated Roman goddess Fama. Hyacinth's 'glory' becomes a recognizable spur to what Milton, a century and a half later, following in the Roman tradition revived during the Renaissance, would describe as 'That last infirmity of noble mind,/To scorn delights and seek laborious days':

Nor am I lacking in anything to grace
my natural desire to acquire such fame
as may establish your glory everywhere.

It is this challenge, to acquire fame, secured through poetry and an allegiance to the poet's influential and powerful citizen-friend, that becomes the governing theme. What is more, the refocusing makes sense. In the delicate, lush atmosphere of the *Palazzo Medici*, not far from the splendid chapel decorated with frescoes by Benozzo Gozzoli, who had earlier frescoed the walls of the Machiavellis' own *palazzo*, the Hyacinth allegory would have seemed agreeable and appropriate, as both *canzoni*, with their pastoral-political implications, pointed to a bright future for the poet himself.

Behind Niccolò's marvellous poetic trees and his crags carved in Hyacinth's name, and the stars that fade before Hyacinth's radiance, in the nearby Medici chapel Benozzo's mounted, stern-visaged Magi pressed ahead. They moved forever towards Bethlehem across the theatrical walls. They were accompanied by Lorenzo himself, by Pietro the Gouty (his father), his daughters, and even Benozzo's master, Fra Angelico. Groups of soldiers and their elegant servants, clad in rich blue and crimson tunics and cloaks, escorted them under an unnaturally pale, holy sky.

In the not so distant past as well, or ten years earlier, when Niccolò was fourteen, lay a complementary and matching moment of fame for his father Bernardo. This had also taken place in the Medici palace, and a glimmer of Bernardo's triumph persisted into the present as mute flattery of his son's success. It too had centred on a publication. Appearing to much acclaim in 1483, Bartolomeo Scala's *De Legibus et iudiciis dialogus* (Dialogue on Laws and Legal Judgements) represented Bernardo as a character in a dialogue, or as a lawyer-participant in a fictional debate with Scala over the tricky question of the requirements for ideal laws.²

Ought they to change according to the changing conditions of their societies, or remain fixed, much like the divinity understood as their source? In Scala's dialogue Bernardo is depicted as siding with the humanists, who saw ideal laws as unchanging. This turned out to be a liberal viewpoint because it shielded legal judgements from corruption, or the supposed arrogance and opportunism of lawyers themselves, despite the fact that in arguing his position Bernardo kept probing for common ground between himself and his amiable, important rival.

The witty Scala was Chancellor of Florence. A well-known historian and writer of fables, he was to continue as Chancellor until his death in 1497. In 1483, he dedicated his *Dialogus* to Lorenzo de' Medici, setting his debate with Bernardo in the luxurious atrium of his new *palazzo*, or not far from the *Palazzo Medici*, in Borgo Pinti.

In those days both he and Bernardo were warmly welcomed, or so the dedication of the *Dialogus* implies, into the Medicis' august literary circles. Ten years later, Bernardo's son, in shaping his two *canzoni* into an allegory of the life of Lorenzo's son Giuliano, was no doubt complimented on extending the relationship between their families.

The Religious Revolution

Girolamo Savonarola seemed at first to emerge from nowhere. He loomed, people perhaps imagined, surprisingly and shockingly out of a wounded Christian landscape, even if by 1492 there had been subtle preparations for his appearance as a seductive revolutionary.

The preparations were both his own and those of the large number of Florentine congregations and leaders who responded to him with interest, contempt, devotion, fervour and, later, violence. At first, though, the preparations seemed nonexistent, or no more visible than, in the centuries ahead, those heralding the arrival on the world's stage of Napoleon, or Lenin or, as assaults on societies may issue from one end of the political and religious spectrum as much as the other and be as cheerful as malignant, Tom Paine, Jefferson, Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Gandhi, Mao Tse-tung and Pol Pot.

As perhaps also seems self-evident, in politics revolutionaries often look forwards, in religion backwards. If a utopian or happier future awaits the Marxist or democrat, or even the Fascist and Nazi, the sacredness of a sacrificed yet divine past beckons to the priest or minister in search of a lost spiritual purity wrecked by earthly corruption.

No good cheer seemed apparent in Savonarola, in whose sermons irony sank into roaring accusations that rose as grim paradoxes: 'In the primitive Church the chalices were of wood, the prelates of gold; these days the Church has chalices of gold and prelates of wood'; 'O Florence, Florence, Florence, for your sins, for your cruelty, for your greed, for your lasciviousness, for your ambition, you have yet to suffer many adversities and much grief'; 'Bethink you well, O ye rich, for affliction shall smite ye'; 'This city shall no more be called Florence, but a den of thieves, of turpitude and bloodshed. Then shall ye all be poverty-stricken, all wretched, and your name, O priests, shall be changed into a terror ... Know that unheard-of times are at hand.'¹

These pronouncements, together with many more on higher, intellectual planes of political theorizing, streamed forth from the wispy, acidic Dominican friar of Ferrara, whose sensual lips, looped nose and cadaverous body provoked feelings of revulsion, until he began to speak.

Then his cultivated, booming voice, which Michelangelo said he could never forget, together with his inspired gaze, and his fingers raised in blessings that cursed as much as pardoned, surged out at educated and uneducated alike, often in huge rapt crowds. His appeal was no accident. He had poured hours of rehearsal time into his quaverings of mood and volume, after in his apprentice years managing to hold the attention of 'only some simpletons and a few little women' for no more than a couple of exasperated minutes.

At the peak of his career, over thirteen thousand jammed the *Duomo* to listen to his charismatic, battering declarations of disaster and victory, among them, close to the end, Niccolò himself. By then, in the late 1490s, as Landucci, an early *Piagnono* (literally 'Weeper,' or one of Savonarola's fanatical supporters), observed, the tawny, gesticulating priest was 'held in such esteem that there were many men and women who, if he had said, *Entrate nel fuoco* (Step into the fire) would have actually obeyed him. He was considered by many to be a prophet, and he himself claimed to be one.'²

A major source of his success was coincidence. This took the form of superstitious fears of the coming half-millennium in 1500. The dreaded milestone inflamed for many an end-of-the-world sense of doom. It was abetted by the threat of a French invasion, spreading poverty, religious mistrust and his own contradictions.

The latter elevated him above other crusading priests also offended by widespread churchly corruption and religious decline into a commanding position that attracted the attention of all Italy. His acuity and learning, which were considerable (they had a familial heritage: his grandfather had taught medicine at the university of Padua), weighed into the balance, along with heated single-mindedness, or monomania. These qualities he aimed not so much at power, as his critics assumed, as at the promotion of a genuine reformation of Florentine society. It was a goal that to some seemed repellant because if achieved it would have required a complete surrender of their wealth while dragooning them into altering their innermost natures.

Savonarola's first stay in Florence, which had lasted for five years in the 1480s, ended in failure from the standpoint of converting almost anyone to his cause.

When he returned in 1490–1, however, or by the time Niccolò was twenty-two, his now disciplined confidence, lashed by macabre dreams in which he saw himself reborn as a prophet gifted with what he called a ‘terrifying’ (*spaventoso*) style, blended into wooing the poor and overwhelmed his much larger audiences.³

‘I said,’ he scribbled in the margin of the published version of his Sermon 5, delivered on 20 February 1491, ‘that the devil uses the great to oppress the poor so that they can’t do any good.’⁴

By then two new political developments, which he appears with uncanny shrewdness to have anticipated, had begun to abet his attainment of broad religious goals: the sickness unto death of Lorenzo de’Medici, whose gouty body worsened with every passing day, and the likelihood that the French king, Charles VIII, would fulfil his longstanding ambition to seize Italian territory through an invasion pouring down from the north.

Lorenzo’s decline, in April 1492 (when Niccolò was twenty-three), induced an embarrassing awkwardness. Savonarola had been invited to return to Florence by the Republic’s de facto ruler, and he had responded not only by doing so but by denouncing his host from the pulpit in San Marco for frivolity, licentiousness and sponsoring the sexier productions of such artists as Botticelli, which he found disreputable. Unfazed or perhaps intrigued, Lorenzo sought Savonarola’s deathbed absolution anyway, and he apparently administered it, though not, if tradition is credited, without harrumphing hesitations.⁵

Lorenzo’s dying ushered in the revival of brutish, superstitious beliefs, together with an end to decades of expensive artistic patronage. Superstition had never fully died out, but now humanism and the spirit of liberal, empirical inquiry were shunted aside. The death scene itself ran along bumpy tracks.

Retiring in pain to his Villa Careggi in the hills just outside the city, the forty-three-year-old early promoter of Michelangelo bade farewell to his son Giovanni, who was about to leave for a new life in Rome. He accepted final visits from friends and his son Piero, who was to succeed him. Lorenzo offered Piero the brusque advice that he be sure to get up early so as to deal with government business at his best: Piero’s self-devoted, hazy grasp of administrative details, despite his hearty good looks, was less than reassuring.

The nursing home atmosphere at the Medici villa during those last days mingled recitations of Tuscan poetry by Lorenzo’s miserable sympathizer, Angelo Ambrogini (who had taken the *nom de plume* Poliziano), with the dust of precious stones. On the advice of one of his more feckless physicians, several

gems, along with pearls, had been crushed into a pointless medicinal brew, which the dying leader eyed sceptically, but then drank.

Ghastly portents abounded. Marsilio Ficino reported a nightmare vision of giants scuffling in his garden. Howling she-wolves tormented the dark. Queer flashes filled the pre-dawn Florentine sky. During the night of 5 April, or just before Lorenzo breathed his last on Sunday, 8 April, lightning smashed the lantern atop Brunelleschi's *Duomo*, shattering its marble balls and masonry and punching a cascade of blocks and bricks into the *piazza* below. On being informed that the cascade had fallen in the direction of his palace, Lorenzo's hopefulness collapsed and he remarked, 'I shall surely die.'⁶

Mourning for him, perhaps because many sensed an icy selfishness at the core of his aesthetically warm soul, was neither deep nor city-wide, despite a funeral laced with pomp, and the modest crowd attending his burial at San Lorenzo beside his brother Giuliano, who had been assassinated years ago. Nor in the months to come did Piero inspire trust in a Medici-ruled future. Savonarola kept up his vituperative exhortations, launched at his Sunday audiences, that the family come to the assistance of poor women, children and the sick. The new Medici autocrat seemed unaware of their plight.⁷

Piero favoured a regal splendour. His beribboned horses, his flowing locks and querulous eyes, which seemed to peer past people into vague stimulating glories, reacted with puzzlement to the Dominican friar's contemptuous barrage: 'You, you vile slaves, who dwell in filth, wallow as you will: let your bodies be full of wine, your loins loose in lechery, and your hands stained with the blood of the poor, for this is your [lot]. But know that your bodies and your souls are in my hands, and after a short time, your bodies will be scourged to a pulp.'

Charles VIII of France might provide a realization of these unpleasant visions, or so quite a few influential Florentines, along with Savonarola himself, began to believe, as the French King, in command of an army of over 30,000 smartly outfitted troops, and equipped with the latest in long-barrelled siege cannons, invaded Italy in September 1494.⁸ What no one expected was that in an act of gushing cowardice Piero would collaborate in Charles's effort to humiliate his own city, or that his treachery might lead to a repudiation of the Medici themselves, followed by their expulsion from Florence and Savonarola's triumph.

In fact the youthful French king, who had succeeded to the throne at the age of fourteen in 1483, had for years been accustomed to thinking of himself

along pampered, messianic lines. His claim to the Kingdom of Naples, which he planned to enforce through war and by arranging *en passant* treaties of surrender with Florence and Rome, was based not simply in a legal dispute but in his passionate Christian mission to cleanse and purify.

As far back as 1485, as he entered Rouen, an elaborate theatrical tableau showing him ensconced between allegorical representations of Justice, Prudence, Temperance, Peace and Sanctity, with each announcing that God spoke through his royal mind and body, had excited his sulky teenage intelligence. By autumn 1494 this sort of smarmy propaganda, appreciated by complaisant multitudes in France, had been extended into the idea that he had been born to promote a divine world-wide redemption.⁹

Inept, frightened, short of troops, needing a French alliance and the King's support against his embittered enemies at home, Piero granted him as he arrived in Italy the prominent Florentine seaports of Pisa and Livorno, together with fortresses along the Republic's frontier, in which each of the commanders seemed eager to lay down his weapons at the mere whisper of the Medici name, or, so to speak, its declining power. Piero also tossed in a promise to the King of 200,000 florins, no doubt hoping to render superfluous a French assault on the city itself.¹⁰

Informed of these manoeuvres, and following on Charles' gratuitous slaughter of troops defending the Florentine fortress at Fivizzano, a dire warning of what was to come if the Republic resisted him, the Signoria reacted with outrage. It rejected Piero's concessions to the scraggly-bearded King, and cobbled together to deal with his treachery a group of distinguished citizen-mediators, among them the now prominent Savonarola.

In the meantime, a catastrophe awaited Piero himself. Frazzled by the sneers of emboldened city officials on his return from meeting Charles at his encampment, where he was impressed by the blue silk flags of imperial triumph snapping in the October breeze and a gaudy display of camp followers, among them lounging cooks, gaggles of prostitutes and the soldiers' pretty wives, Piero tried to shrug off several humiliating incidents in which the gate at the Palazzo della Signoria was slammed shut against him.¹¹

Advised by his few remaining friends to retreat into his own palace – at one point he was assailed by a mob of hooting citizens, then assaulted by thugs tossing boulders from the Signoria tower at his poorly armed escort – he did so, to no avail. Respect for him, for the Medici and their flagging régime seemed to fall apart in direct proportion to their previous repression of civil liberties.

As this demoralizing fact penetrated his fantasy world, he found himself that evening, together with his wife, his cousin Giulio and various retainers, fleeing in flustered desperation by coach and on horseback towards Venice, scrabbling at faint hopes of safety in the prayerful dark, amid the jingling of the family silver and other valuables that he and they had managed to snatch up at the last minute.

Within an hour, Charles's advance guard, sent ahead to the *Palazzo Medici* at Piero's invitation to arrange rooms for his visit, began looting the *palazzo* itself. The French officers were joined by crowds of citizens and others crashing in from the street. A senseless destruction of the priceless house, with its climax likely to be an act of enraged arson, was averted only by the Signoria's calling out troops to protect it.

Charles nonetheless proceeded as planned with his ceremonial entrance into the city on 17 November. He arrived on a bay charger and moving through the half-empty streets at a stately, authoritarian pace beneath a battle canopy and among over 10,000 men (he had divided his troops, sending the rest into other cities). At first he demanded that Piero's accustomed powers and prestige be turned over to him, and reacted with amazement when, as the leading member of the Signoria's delegation, Savonarola berated him with a contemptuous refusal.¹²

The moment seemed oddly to belong to the priest who had foretold the King's coming as the enemy of corruption in Italy and the Church. He showed scant shyness about seizing it himself, with his persuasive eloquence.

Over the next few minutes in fact there began to unfold a bizarre drama. It would spread about during the next several years, or until a bloodier theatre of excommunication, torture and executioners' flames foretold its end, a political-religious display that complemented an entire people's insulted, pious aspirations, and not just in Florence but in Italy and Europe itself.

To maintain, however, that Savonarola understood with any completeness the powerful historical energies coursing through the Medici palace as he met Charles that morning would be to nurse a hypothesis too fragile to be sustained by the evidence. At the same time, one misses the mark in assuming that he had no clues to the political implications of his ideas, or to the more daring ideas soon to succeed them, or to the remarkable, strategic role that he now began to play in what was to amount to an authentic religious-political revolution – with its dark-bright thrusts, its invasiveness both subtle and insolent into a European

history not yet so much as written or conceived. The patterns of his life fitted coolly into his historical intuition and his apprehension of the tipping points of historical vulnerabilities.

Extracting from his pocket a silver crucifix and flaunting it before him while calling Charles the scourge and redeemer of Florence and Italy, Savonarola apparently threatened the King with God's wrath – and the King seems to have wept at the phrase – unless he at once reassembled his troops and departed with all good speed for Rome and Naples.¹³

Using a mix of flattery and cajolery, and coaxing Charles into agreeing and then into signing a treaty with the Signoria on 25 November, and next, as if prompted, into diverting his forces southward – actually into a quasi-defeat after his initially joyous reception and coronation at Naples – Savonarola found himself celebrated for having averted a Florentine Armageddon.

Whether this popular conviction was in any sense rational or simply an exaggeration, with the Medici out of the way he began to exult in his desire to take charge of the city's political life. His presence, he argued, was now essential to the future of the ancient Republic on the verge of its rebirth, and he repeatedly proclaimed his personal auspiciousness before government and church audiences alike. The city's future, he suggested, ought to march in step with his own: a dream, to which he had often alluded, of fateful crosses, one black and dangling over Rome and shedding lethal swords, and the other gold and soaring over Jerusalem, indicated Florence's disastrous and heaven-sent choices, and the citizens would have to make up their minds.¹⁴

This unexpected shift in tactics, abetted by his new immersion in actual power, seemed to many – and as later would seem apparent, to Niccolò too – both magnetic and justified. He declared himself ready to participate in designing a new law-based and socially progressive government. He also intended, or so he promised, to abstain from any hands-on role in running it. Popular loathing of the Medici would be dissipated by eliminating their deceptive governing committees. A façade of republicanism had only preserved their autocracy.

As a replacement he urged a far more representative Grand Council, consisting solely of citizens and arranged on Venetian lines, though without a Venetian-type Doge: he mistrusted the likely corruption of a single, dominant *capo*. Simultaneously, and here he insinuated a cause of supreme importance to him, the new-minted government would embody Christian ideals.¹⁵

Swept aside – and here too his popularity as the nominal saviour of the

Republic guaranteed an invitation to organize its constitutional mechanisms – would be any attempt by former officials to substitute a new government of their own. To most people their efforts seemed flimsily *popolano* in any case, or incompatible with the increasingly widespread desire to create a government administered on democratic principles.

Yet it was no genuine democracy that the priest-leader wished to establish, or a representational system responsive in class-neutral ways to the civil and material needs of ordinary people – one that might, for instance, as in various modern democracies, seek to safeguard minority rights. Crucially, his mind was biblical in its contempt of earthly riches and medieval in its adhering to a view of death as a gateway. Death offered vistas of Heaven and Hell, while politics could light a path to redemption.

Even helping the poor was less a goal than a ritual. Citizens and others must dedicate themselves to God's republican realm, or His semi-representative, divine kingdom on Earth. Indeed, Savonarola sought the establishment of a new Jerusalem: 'Blessed will you be, Florence, for you will soon become that celestial Jerusalem (*quella Jerusalem superna*).'¹⁶

The reformed society would also, however, as soon became evident, be decked out in a number of the most rigid restraints of thought-control. Screws of intimidation, while themselves not new, would in novel combinations strangle any real opportunity for privacy and individuality: book-burnings; bonfires of the vanities, or the destruction of any item, especially any work of art, seen as conducive to pleasure; armies of children (*fanciulli*) thousands strong and trained to spy on their parents while raiding gambling dens; processions of Bible-thumping women (often directing their attention at a law banning sodomy, though only one 'sodomite' seems to have been executed); and throngs of sacramental wailers and shriekers.¹⁷

These hysterical clubs, or actually unleashed mobs, were to multiply in tandem with the growth of democracy as public behaviour was realigned with pious purposes. One outcome of his policies was that his divine utopia, in which politics bowed to religion, achieved more in the way of social paralysis than spiritual growth. Ultimately, it incited a storm of suspicion and terror.

For the time being, however, Savonarola's most dramatic innovations, harsh and pain-centred, lay months in the future. In late 1494, in a few philosophical sermons, any number of which, given their popularity, Niccolò is likely to have heard, he sketched out an apologia for what he regarded as the Aristotelian basis of his beliefs, seeking to soothe the aesthetic and humane anxieties of educated

people, though the uneducated were not forgotten.¹⁸ In essence, and before congregations of armed supporters consisting of segregated men and women, he maintained that the physical world was a deception. Christian philosophers such as Augustine and Aquinas, Aristotle's successors, had shown that faith sufficed to convey the soul into God's presence. Religious and other types of education were less consequential.¹⁹

As a good many of his listeners realized, the charm of this argument carried dangers of its own, including that of social disorder. In urging the desertion of knowledge for sincerity, which he put forth as the chief instrument of salvation, he seemed to authorize the liberation of violent passions. These he encouraged as long as they supported Christian tenets.

Marsilio Ficino, though envious of Savonarola's mass following, took note of the suicidal trap in this promotion of emotions based on faith alone. Coupled with another subversive thesis, starting in 1495, that of denouncing the lax, militarist papacy, these passions might invite retaliation. In assailing both Church and clergy, Ficino maintained, the friar might license 'enemies that would not be stayed against him.'

Public purgations on a large scale also followed. These involved the burnings of paintings, tapestries, playing cards, gowns, fancy hats, sketches, mirrors and furniture in a set of fiery extravaganzas before the Palazzo della Signoria, in piles crowned by effigies of Satan (one of the first of these strange celebrations took place on Carnival Day, or 16 February 1496). Printed books and incunabula were incinerated, with each of these chant-accompanied, leaping, stomping conflagrations lauded as a bonfire of the vanities. They preceded by months, amid the menacing clouds surrounding his continual attacks on the Vatican, the publication of his excommunication in July 1497.

Botticelli, a devout supporter of Savonarola's campaign against 'impure' influences, whose studio, as gossip had it, was packed with 'loafers,' or hedonists and other dubious characters, hurled one of his canvases into the flames. Filippino Lippi did the same.²⁰

Even if no evidence exists that Savonarola ordered the bonfires, his indignation certainly served as their catalyst. In a city aflame with religious fervour – pious plays were performed and new religious societies, or confraternities, sprang into being more or less weekly throughout the 1490s and beyond – acts of Christian affirmation and religious abuse were commonplace. Paranoid impulses ignited flagrant outbursts, including once or twice against the Jews.²¹

Nor, in tracing the patterns of these disturbances, ought their stimulation by

the city's very streets, houses, towers and bridges, not to mention its network of churches, nunneries and abbeys, to be neglected. A religious aura, glorious if provocative and police-like, permeated an urban atmosphere full of the antique, incantatory hypnosis.

The glittering Christian world, plumped out in sacred images and icons, nestled in every mean, filthy, ancient and clean corner. Blessings and the grizzled shadows of torture, as well as shabby, bulking curses, squirmed among the lithest statues limping and lounging along the angel- and devil-saturated alleys.

Beyond the parapets of the palaces, or the amphitheatres created by the *piazze*, which served as staging sites for sacred mystery plays as well as 'profane' street theatre, and past the lovely bells up and down the cobblestoned streets, tolling the hours of worship by day and night, there arose amid chimings and ringings vast crowds of marble and painted saints in sheltering niches.

John the Baptist and St Thomas presided over open-air markets. Along the footpaths dragons awaited their saintly slayers. Sculpted martyrs vanished into granite flames. Redemptive crosses rose over the smithies, beside grocers' carts and taverns and at every scrubbed, worn threshold.

Provident cathedrals, with the lushest among them the *Duomo*, floated like instructional flowers over this intricate beehive of salvation, torment, sin and beauty. More modest churches caught the eye with supplications on the nearest lintel and its whittled demons, or hoary wooden doors overflowing with tales from Genesis, or Christ's passion or the punishments of sinners struggling amid the torments of Hell.

Through all the squares, Gothic *campanili*, flying buttresses and apses displayed their peaceful tentacles of rouge and green marble and glass. At intervals that resembled musical rests in the motet-singing, hymns and sacred chants, crowds of religious houses and hospitals bent and bowed, offering solace to any restless soul, or to men, women and children going about their daily business, or sinking to their knees in moments of despair before some sacred pillar, bereft of all but hope.

Nor, as may be imagined, within this urban oasis of music and sculpture, could the Vatican's apprehension of peril in the face of the Dominican priest's attacks, and nurtured by the Pope's fears and loathing, and anticipated by the insights of such as Marsilio Ficino, take long to assume some baleful form.

Months before the celebration of the new year, held as per custom on 25 March 1498, the Signoria sent off to Rome a new ambassador, messer Ricciardo

Becchi.²² He would represent Florentine interests now understood as running counter to Savonarola's. The chances of the Republic's excommunication had awakened apprehension. If, as seemed likely, the impetuous friar continued to deliver his venomous sermons despite an injunction against them, the political, economic and military consequences could be severe.

In fact Savonarola delivered two of his most damning sermons at the *Duomo* on 2 and 3 March, with Niccolò among the thousands present to hear them. Nor were they his last. Many felt that his 'terrorizing' style had grown by leaps and bounds, and he kept up his defiance till April, relocating to another church, the San Marco. Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia, pope since 1492), hesitant, shrewd, orotund, deliberate, scornful and grouchy, vacillated between enforcing and ignoring his ban on a rebellious leader whose popularity might be on the wane.²³

Machiavelli was now nearly twenty-nine. Bartolomea, his mother, had died a bit over a year earlier, on 11 October 1496.²⁴ Mourning for her had little to do with his attendance at the *Duomo*, however.

In his earliest-known political analysis, appearing as the third among his scores of astonishingly intimate and official letters, and addressed to the Signoria's new ambassador Becchi in Rome, he offered a scrupulous account of the friar's attitudes and style.

Beyond its personal impressions, his letter is important for its revealing his closeness to Florentine political and military power. Though he lacked any official standing with the Signoria, he clearly knew Becchi well. His letter's indication of their more than casual acquaintanceship – and this despite his use of the formal, conventional *voi* – affirms their cordiality if not collegiality. Becchi has sought out his views, which Niccolò is sending on to him 'in accordance with your wishes.' Equally striking is the letter's diction, its recipe of coolness and empathy. A ripening maturity, if not a spiky, thoughtful briskness, propels the clear, crisp argument, honing the brash conclusions beyond any needs of the assignment.

In permitting dispassionate observation, or the dictates of an on-the-spot journalism, to guide his pen while making no issue of himself, he lays bare a curiosity that amounts to a type of self-questioning. His judgements are sure-footed and prudent as he pins down the slippery details. In sentences allowing his personality to shine through sprightly chinks, he offers Becchi a mind at play with questions of power and how to manage it, implying that he has no aversion to managing it himself:

To give you [voi], in accordance with your wishes, a full account of matters here concerning the friar, you should first know that once the two sermons ... were given ... he said that if what he preached did not come from [God], [God] might [as well] display [some] sign of it. He did this, some say, ... to unite his partisans and to strengthen their defence of him, fearing lest the new Signoria, already chosen but not made public, might be against him.²⁵

Machiavelli at once focuses on Savonarola's fears for his own safety, and his bombastic method of rousing his supporters through evocations of outside threats:

Fearing greatly for himself and believing that the new Signoria would not be reluctant to injure him – and having decided that quite a few citizens [ought to] be brought down with him – he started in with great scenes of horror.²⁶

At the same time, Machiavelli observes that his own eyewitness account will be solid and sceptical, adding that he has no desire to be taken in by 'explanations that [are] quite effective to those not examining them closely.'²⁷

A sensitivity to deception leads him to minimize the drama in what follows, a nose-to-the-ground assumption that Savonarola may be out to bamboozle his audience. Suspiciousness runs through his ironic pretence to confusion over audience reactions ('as for what the common people are saying and what men hope or fear, I shall leave that up to you who are a judicious man to determine; you can determine these matters better than I can inasmuch as you are fully aware of our temperament, the nature of the times'²⁸), which suggests the wariness evident in almost every line, as towards the end:

He seeks to set all of them [the Signoria and the people] at odds with the Supreme Pontiff, and turning towards him and his attacks, says of the [P]ope what could be said of the wickedest person you might imagine. Thus in my judgement he acts in accordance with the times and colours his lies accordingly.²⁹

The word 'lies' bangs home a bit harshly, following on a summary of Savonarola's sermon and his reference to Moses killing the vicious slave-master of the ancient Jews in Egypt – the priest had compared himself to Moses and his rebellious heroism – as if someone were tumbling into a steam-room out of an ice-storm.

An odd frost suffuses the irony of Niccolò's request that Becchi 'not consider it too much trouble to tell me in your reply what judgement you make about the condition of the times and the people's minds concerning the condition of our affairs.' Both attitudes and affairs seem in his view threatened by the same icy winds: civilization may be loosening, the times pulling out of joint, the centre refusing to hold.

His phrases suggest harassed creatures wandering through eely shadows, eyes probing at virtues no longer apparent ('tell me ... what judgement you make about the condition of the times'). Strongly hinted at is his assumption that Savonarola's obstreperousness will provoke a reaction. This reaction, needless to say, might easily have provoked a counter-reaction. It might likewise have been both menacing and violent. Though no one could then have known it, it would eventually be set in motion by Martin Luther to the north, in Germany, and also 'would not be stayed.' Had anyone been granted a prophet's foresight, it might have seemed at least equally momentous.

II

The World of War and Diplomacy

Executions and an Official Appointment

At the age of twenty-nine, therefore, Machiavelli began to move up in his world and for complementary and coinciding reasons: his family's slight prominence; his ambitions, connections and abilities as observer, political analyst and reporter; his tact, education and loyalty to Florence; the exile of the Medici; and Savonarola's revolution, along with his defiance, torture and eventual execution. The advancement of the priest's exact contemporary into a government position of narrow if prestigious importance filled an important gap.

This was a gap also created by a seismic shift in government itself, if not in Florentine society. Nurtured over the previous four Savonarolan-influenced years by chilly miseries, various morbid winds seemed to rise and coalesce in May 1498, or just months after Niccolò dispatched his report to Becchi. Among them must be counted the precipitous decline of the starving poor and serious outbreaks of syphilis, a disease probably imported by Charles's profligate troops.

The Republic was threatened by a papal injunction unless the friar was brought to heel, and on 8 May he was arrested. His seizure was accompanied by murderous scuffles among his thousands of devoted supporters and the contemptuous, violent, hissing, spitting factions demanding that he be executed, and which, had they been given a chance, would have killed him on the spot.

In streets packed with howling enemies, he found himself, hands tied behind his back, hustled off to the Palazzo della Signoria and imprisoned. In significant cases brought before the Signoria this was routine, or a test of the prisoner's soul and confession. Questioning and torture took place in a room at the top of Palazzo tower, the so-called *Alberghettino*, or 'little hotel,' a stony, skeletal place, whose grimness hinted for short-term residents at an unpleasant end.¹

By now he was blamed by many but by no means all for masses of the city's problems. Prominent among them, along with the financial deterioration and the epidemic disease, was the inability of the Republic's mercenary soldiers to

recapture Pisa, which had been ceded to King Charles by Piero de' Medici but which refused to end its resistance to the restoration of Florentine rule.

More pernicious was his claim that had covered him in adulation and ridicule: that he was a God-ordained prophet. His religious insolence, as it appeared, or heresy, no matter how strongly confirmed for his adherents by his symbolic dreams and his adroit handling of the French King, had led Marsilio Ficino not atypically to accuse him of 'tyrannical malignity' and practising 'a diabolical fraud.'

The power of these accusations was hardly diminished by the government's uncovering a substantial cache of small arms, including artillery pieces, smuggled into the church of San Marco, where he delivered his sermons, though he insisted on his ignorance of any plans for his defence or an uprising.²

His end proved as transfixing as prescient of his future unsettled reputation, whose fascination lingers with a special cryptic melancholy to this day. Together with two priest-followers, he accepted a challenge from the Franciscan friar Francesco da Puglia on 25 March to demonstrate the authenticity of his supposedly divine attributes in an ordeal by fire.³

This ghastliness required a public exhibition, not unknown if seldom successful, of his asserted miraculous connection to God by an exposure to deadly flames. Evidence indicates that before accepting Francesco's challenge Savonarola tried to wriggle out of it through hours of theological disputation, even if torture weeks later on the Signoria's *strappado*, which yanked his arms out of their shoulder-sockets, inducing indescribable pain, led him to confess that he had been a conman misleading everybody.

His forced confession he subsequently and unconvincingly recanted, though many, among them Landucci, remained persuaded to their horror that he had told the truth, even if he also in the end seems to have welcomed the fire-ordeal.⁴ Abashed by pride and threats, as now seems likely, and faced with implacable hatred on all sides, he may simply have chosen to let matters take their course, especially as any hope of rescue or leniency no longer mitigated against the beauty of the martyr's unembarrassed sacrifice.

These ambiguities aside, his adherents, among them the future historian and Machiavelli's friend Francesco Guicciardini, continued to admire him long after his subsequent gruesome incineration under different circumstances. For decades Guicciardini argued that 'if he was good, we have seen a great prophet in our time; if bad, we have seen a very great man,' who 'knew how to feign in

public so remarkable an enterprise [his religious-political revolution], without ever having been found in a falsehood.⁵

A sudden April shower put paid to the fire-ordeal in any case – its cancellation by bad weather seemed to some a sign of his deliverance by God – though when on 8 May he found himself arrested by the Signoria and confronted with what amounted to his third trial for heresy, he also faced an alternate sort of fire test: execution by hanging followed by public cremation.⁶

The Signoria, packed with new members nominated and elected to replace others favourable to him, at first decided to burn him alive, in a perverse variation of the fire ordeal, but, as Landucci notes, on 22 (actually 23) May, a Wednesday morning, the eight hostile officials now in charge (the Eight, as they were termed) ‘made the decision that [Savonarola and his two priest-followers] would be hanged and burnt.’⁷

In preparation for either possibility the previous evening had seen the construction of a scaffold walkway leading from the entrance of the Palazzo della Signoria into the middle of its fronting *piazza*, or the site previously chosen for the fire test. A circular platform was erected at the far end of the walkway. It was surmounted by a tall wooden cross, intended for the hanging and burning (the spot is today marked by an inscribed pink marble tablet set into the paving stones). When Savonarola’s enemies objected to this unusual gallows that it looked as if ‘they [were] going to crucify him,’ chunks of its wooden arms were sawn off to avoid the indelicate suggestion of Christian martyrdom.⁸

A vast crowd composed of men only, citizens and others, with Niccolò likely among them – few, including the banished women, seemed to wish to miss out on the fateful occasion – assembled to watch what became a long divestiture ceremony for the three priests, consisting for the most part of an intricate ritual of degradation.

Francisco Remolins, the papal envoy, recounted their crimes against God and man. Tomasso Sardi, a Dominican conventual from the friary at Santa Maria Novella, relieved them of their priestly garments and other possessions, and perhaps even scripture, though each was allowed to wear a simple white robe. Once they had been turned over to the civil authorities for punishment, as was customary, and with the prearranged sentence of death passed on them, their heads and bodies were shaved and they were led along the walkway to the foot of the gallows.

Savonarola’s priest-adherents preceded him into the hanging, chanting Christ’s name as nooses were placed about their necks. Savonarola himself then

stepped to the gallows, saying nothing that witnesses could hear, though his lips kept moving; he seems to have chosen to meet his death in a reverential silence reminiscent of Christ's on the cross.

Once all three were dead, or after a few minutes, the executioner set fire under them to a pile of logs, hay and gunpowder for their cremation, or, more accurately, the elimination of any proof of their existence. The gunpowder guaranteed speed and heat to the flames, which burned intensely for hours, or until their necks, which were strapped to the gallows by iron corselets to prop them up, and their torsos, arms, hands and legs, fell off, mixing with the acrid smell of sulphur and the stench of boiling organs, muscles and veins as these in turn dropped into the hot ashes.

The whole glowing mass was then scooped up and lugged off to the Arno. No trace of their body parts, which might have been seized on as relics, or which could at a minimum have attracted worshippers, was left to assuage the priest's thousands of *Piagnoni*: nothing.⁹

Yet each of these precautions failed, it should be noted, and within days a few women were spotted praying at the site. They were soon joined by others, and even now, at a distance of centuries, Savonarola's most powerful memorial, that of history, asserts its magnetic tugs and pulls.

Unresolved ambiguities seem to hover over his life and career, begging for resolution. The import of the pious, revolutionary adventurer shivers as an ambiguous image in the latest historical air – as dusky, attractive and daunting, to judge from Niccolò's letter, as it must then have seemed to him. The small, stiff, compassionate figure, affixed to the fiery scaffold that still somehow resembles a cross, teases out up-to-date dreams and fears as a type of bequeathed darkness, within which there stirs a terrible, perhaps holy and mysterious spot of light.

Machiavelli was appointed Second Chancellor of the Republic of Florence on 19 June 1498.¹⁰ Savonarola had been dead for less than a month. Charles of France had also died, possibly of syphilis but nominally from cracking his head against a door in his castle at Amboise while rushing off with his queen to watch a tennis match the day before the priest's rained-out fire test. The twenty-nine-year-old novice Florentine official assumed another position as well, that of Secretary to a governmental committee called the Ten of War (*Dieci di Balìa*), sometimes referred to as the Ten of Liberty and Peace (*Dieci di Libertà e Pace*). Both positions offered civil service opportunities to influence policy at the highest levels. Each had required high-level nods of approval, with the first the

result of a double election, by the Council of Eighty and the Grand Council, consisting of some 3,000 citizens.¹¹ Together the positions paid a decent salary of under 130 florins, if at a devalued rate.

To those in the know, Machiavelli's entrance into Florence's governing circles and his swift-seeming rise among them could scarcely have come as a surprise. Neither post had simply dropped into his lap, and one may justifiably speculate on the satisfaction that his arrival in the chambers of decision-making would have brought him. They had long been a familiar habitat for members of his family, and over several generations (one remembers the wealthy Alessandro Filippo Machiavelli, for instance, or the erstwhile *Gonfaloniere di giustizia*, Paolo di Giovanni Machiavelli). The morning boyhood walks across the Arno to his early Latin lessons had turned into more stimulating river crossings for the mature young man bound on state business to an office in the Palazzo della Signoria.

His office was located on the second floor of the today renovated and restored Palazzo Vecchio, as the Palazzo della Signoria is now called, that irregular, large yet elegant building at the centre of the city, more or less finished by 1313 and topped off with its over three-hundred-foot-high Etruscan-style tower.

In the Chancellery, where the narrow, high-ceilinged chamber reserved for his work was situated, his likely spot is indicated by a plaque and posthumous portrait by Santi di Tito (plate I), though the old, portly, stained desks, candles, papers and inkwells – his own and those of the other seven or so secretaries who would have served under him – are long gone.

Another speculation allows the modern eye to visualize his diminutive but vigorous and dark form, alert and in a bit of a rush – his letters often speak of haste and the press of responsibilities – moving across the *piazza* below as in the morning he approached the Palazzo's entrance.

Passing between its massive, iron-braced doors, sealed shut at night with hefty clasps and safety bolts, he would have noticed the graceful fountain by Michelozzo di Bartolomeo (c.1396–1472), stationed in the first courtyard. It sported a satirical winged *putto* by Verrocchio, toting a dolphin far too big for its childish arms: a characteristic self-mocking touch on the threshold of the Republic's political arena.

Extraordinary works of art, few of them satirical, would have surrounded him as he hurried through the building: an aesthetic brilliance, of which striking examples have survived, most of it smartened up, polished and installed according to a Florentine tradition reaching back over seventy years

by then of urban magnificence (*à la* Lorenzo the Magnificent). An artificial assembly of painted eyes, fading colours, amorphous, brazen and monstrous limbs, released and restrained passions, epic battles and calming, mythical moments of dalliance, sensuality and religiosity mingled with idealized military victories.

The impressive vista seemed ubiquitous, and unrolled through a score of airy, sun-lit halls, corridors, conference rooms, clubby offices and apartments. Nor would it have seemed anything less than a political art gallery, or the delivery of superb propaganda out of an age of intense aesthetic devotion.

Conscious and unconscious influences, as he hurried past or paused among various gleaming presences, glancing at a picture here or at a piece of sculpture there in the course of his routines, or found himself attracted for seconds to some ruffle of stony liveliness, have not been much alluded to by the chroniclers. It may be surmised, though, that these instants of reckoning mattered a good deal to a sensibility in many ways consecrated to aesthetics and the rhetorical patterns of beauty, and that they remain essential to a more precise understanding of his temperament and even career.

The Palazzo's central rooms, for instance, formed the bureaucratic, diplomatic and negotiating centre of the Republic. They promoted the advantages of order, along with the risks of mess, war, honour, irrationality, love and even murder. In the mezzanine, the grand *Sala dei Dugento* (Ducento), where Council meetings still take place and which dates from 1472, with its coffered ceiling by Benedetto da Maiano (1442–97) and his brother Giuliano, brims as then with gorgeous fleur-de-lys and rosette patterns set in gold. Its frieze scrolls by amid repetitions of the Florentine coat of arms.

The *Sala di* (Pope) *Clement VII* retains its expensive original red and white floor tiles set in wheels and ovals. A decorative passageway leads into the elaborate *Sala dei Cinquecento*, built in *c.* 1495 at the behest of Savonarola for his new, more representative Grand Council.¹² With its *invenzione*, or conception, by Simone di Tommaso del Pollaiuolo (*il Cronaca*; 1457–1508), the chamber spans over 170 by 77 feet, and has preserved its enticing laquearia. Even now it seems an *embaras de richesses* of marvellous allegorical scenes devoted to ancient battles, pacts, grotesques and legendary lovers.

The *Sala dell' Udienza*, the official receiving room for dignitaries, and built along the lines of an *invenzione* of Benedetto da Maiano, remains as rich and ornate as in Niccolò's salad days, with its gilt and coffered ceiling, its frieze of gold ropes and leaves. A tinge of artificiality in its colours conjures up clues to a

mythical world beyond the ordinary one of government offices. It seems to hoist a more mundane reality into suggestive historical and spiritual dimensions.

Aesthetic luxuries augmented the pleasures of freedom. In a more liberal and developing political atmosphere, they imparted a fresh, negotiable air. Crucial choices might be swayed by the thrust of a painted limb, the calibration of a brushed-in eyelash, the swart clouds sweeping across painterly if adulterated skies, even some casually flirtatious exposure to celebratory gold.

Bartolomeo Scala, Bernardo Machiavelli's colleague and friend, had died in 1497, in a real sense dying out of the exhausted Medici government, whose Chancellor he had been for fifteen years, leaving a vacuum to be filled by other officials eager to establish their own directions for new policies. Almost the same might have been said of Alexandri Braccesi, who had not died but who as a pro-Savonarolan had been dismissed from his position as one of the 'due segretarii della Signoria,' following Savonarola's arrest, imprisonment and execution. Machiavelli now replaced him, serving out the second year of his two-year term, after which he would have to stand for election to a series of one-year terms, should he choose to do so.¹³

His titles and duties retained smatterings of bureaucratic confusions. Each had twice been redefined over the several years prior to his taking office, though modern investigations, coupled with re-readings of his and others' letters, have illuminated more about them and opened pathways to a better understanding of his work. Most importantly, the original meaning of 'secretary,' of significance to him and the Signoria, requires acknowledgement. Rather than acting as an assistant keeping the books or taking orders, minutes or dictation from higher-ups, a governmental secretary at Niccolò's level was far more a keeper of state secrets. He occupied a niche in which he was expected to examine the effects of the political past on the present.¹⁴ A Chancellery secretary was in part recruited for his historical insights, which could easily involve secret military and political agreements. These might overshadow contemporary conflicts. The political landscape was always littered with the shards of broken treaties. It might be strewn with the ruins of ambitious yet failed policies.

Humanistically educated state secretaries, among them Machiavelli, were thus in demand to explore a paradox. Potentially violent disputes, either with the local nobility, as for example Caterina Sforza, or with Pisa, and into which, say, the French might be drawn following on the death of King Charles, or which might stimulate the lurking unscrupulousness of other Italian states such as Venice, required an historically astute approach if the Republic's future was

to accommodate social and military challenges. Successful diplomacy, then as now, required the appointment of secretaries who might themselves be budding historians. At a minimum they would be sensitive to historical implications.

Machiavelli's job, more than that of his under-secretaries, also of necessity involved discussions, prudence, debates, travelling and correspondence, plus quasi-journalistic reports on the people and places that he might be ordered to visit.

A letter reached Rome in from three to six days, Venice and Milan in two to four, the on-the-move French court in almost a week. He began to produce a strong run of new official letters, and then a stream of them. His longer letters tended to be of the official rather than the personal variety, though his style in both reflected his confidence, care, sarcasm, apprehensive wit and enthusiasm.

Producing a letter to the Magistorato [*sic*] dei Dieci of 24 July 1499, for instance, which recounted an early mission to secure military support from the nearby ruler of Forlì, Caterina Sforza, found him scratching away in his typically severe, dark hand, with his emphatic yet sensitive nib-strokes, plus the prickly flourishes common to many fifteenth-century communiqués.¹⁵

His editing of his own official letters, as opposed to his personal ones, which as a rule he did not edit, he handled by chasing a line through the rejected words, avoiding any blottings out or hints of concealment, which in government (or 'public') documents might provoke distasteful suspicions of evasion. He quadruple-folded the official and most other letters, addressing them on the outside and sealing them with a waxed stamp for security according to a haphazard postal arrangement – it was scarcely a system – that might be tampered with. He could expect a reply within three days to a week or so, or often enough to establish some measure of efficient communication.

Often too, as in a July 1499 letter to the Ten of War, the ink shone or leaked through the thick sheets, making reading a chore. His pen, however, seldom abandoned its habitual speed and forward movement, even if, sometimes in haste, he now and then split a word down the middle, or left letters dangling, or made careless mistakes, as in a letter from Rome of 1503 (it has no firmer date) to 'uno principale cittadini di Firenze.'

Couriers were reliably to hand, and decently paid for transmissions of correspondence. The volume was always considerable, though members of the Signoria on occasion complained that he did not report in often enough.¹⁶ In fact he soon began to dispatch at least two or three letters, each several pages long, more or less daily, spending hours at his writing desk and so working well

into the night, poring over the squared sheets by flame-stumped candles. With *Fortuna* in the right mood, his couriers might arrive at their destinations *sans* robbery or assault by brigands, or vanishing: the postal air was full of alarms, and the loss of a letter, or even a delay, might affect not only policy but the outcome of a war.

Caterina Sforza and the Crisis at Pisa

Many aspects of his new official life were put to the test in 1499 in two of his earliest missions, one to negotiate with Caterina Sforza at Forlì, where he was sent to bargain over weapons supplies and the future leadership of Florentine troops, another to help resolve the Pisa débacle. Neither proved less than tricky.

Everyone who knew Caterina described as extraordinary the young noblewoman and bastard daughter of the Duke of Milan, praising her sun-drenched blonde beauty, her roving – some said covetous, others uninhibited, sceptical or ravishing – eye, her brazen acts of military daring, and her impressive, quirky if sloppily educated intelligence (plate VII). She had rejected as much as possible of the classical tutoring which a high if illegitimate birth had conferred on her, preferring to focus her feral energy on mastering professional horsemanship and nurturing sensual pleasures.

Her book, *Experiments*, which grew into far more than a hobby, even if she seems to have compiled it only in stolen hours, consisted of catalogues of amulets and magical magnets. She believed them to contain special powers able to restore familial harmony, but added compilations of recipes and descriptions of exotic poisons, among them her pride, her *velano attermine*, which, she boasted, could provide ‘perfect sleep.’

By the time Niccolò met her in mid-July, she had not only survived a few attempts on her life but triumphed over potent enemies. Her father, Galeazzo Maria, was assassinated in 1476. Her first husband, to whom she was betrothed at the age of fourteen in 1477, the Count Girolamo Riario, a dull, foul-tempered nephew of Pope Sixtus IV and a still-surviving member of the Pazzi Conspiracy, was stabbed to death, with his body tossed thumping into the street at Forlì, in April, 1488.

She reacted to his murder by ordering the capture and butchering of those involved, along with members of their families, and by slaughtering at random

a group of other citizens to terrify everyone else. She was now thirty-six, and had seen a second husband, Giacomo Feo, killed as well (over two score citizens were slaughtered to avenge his death). A third husband, Giovanni de' Medici, the son of Piero Francesco, though from a branch of the family other than that of Lorenzo, died of natural causes in 1498, leaving her pregnant with the last of her eight children.¹

Stories abounded of her sexual whims and aristocratic contempt. On one occasion she had sneered at a *condottiere* who confessed himself enthusiastic only about war, and thus unable to dance or enjoy music, or even love, telling him that he ought to be 'greased and stuck in a cupboard' to keep from becoming too 'rusty,' at least until he might be needed for combat.

She showed no hesitation about seizing command of her own troops, however, and a few months after meeting Machiavelli directed cannon fire from her Forlì palace-fortress into the streets at frightened citizens when Cesare Borgia, a still battle-green *condottiere* leading a small army of 8,000 troops into a town of about 7,000, laid siege to the fortress in what became a successful attempt to take her prisoner.²

At the moment her wish was to arrange a 15,000-florin payment from the sixty-kilometre-distant Florentine Signoria. This substantial amount, she proposed, would guarantee the continued participation in Florence's ongoing Pisan war of her son, himself a sometime *condottiere*, the twenty-year-old Count Ottaviano, plus one hundred armed infantry and one hundred armed light horse.

The Count had performed an identical service for Florence during the previous year, but the Signoria now sought a 5,000-florin reduction in his price, not only because Ottaviano seemed less than expert in military matters but also because the Signoria's entire object in retaining him in the first place had been to prop up good relations with his mother.

Forlì was advantageously placed between Venice and Rome, at a crucial intersection between the Republic's consistent enemies. Cultivating an alliance with Caterina's principality had long been understood as good policy (she had even been made an honorary Florentine citizen). Machiavelli was instructed to negotiate a one-third reduction for Ottaviano while setting up a major purchase of gunpowder and weapons from what everyone assumed to be Caterina's ample stocks of war matériel. If possible, he was to hire in Forlì up to five hundred infantrymen to be sent on to the Signoria's Pisan campaign.³

Ottaviano was unavailable, or at least out of town, but Machiavelli plunged into mutual compliments and a polite back and forth with his charming mother over more than a week. He noted that an agent of Ludovico 'Il Moro' Sforza, the Duke of Milan (Caterina was his illegitimate niece), was hanging about as well, and found himself exposed perhaps for the first time to the political negotiator's dithering with the invisible, or with unmentioned facts and motives that later reveal themselves as essential to a mission's success or failure.

Caterina's court resounded with odd clankings and bustlings, and the frustrated new official reported that between fifty and five hundred troops per day were assembling to ride or be marched off to Milan. Many were professional horsemen from other cities or the surrounding villages, plus infantrymen and crossbowmen, all of whom he and the Signoria would have welcomed in the struggle for Pisa, but that the Duke of Milan, a frank competitor with Florence for reinforcements of his own, also wanted: "There was a review here yesterday of five hundred infantry, whom her Excellency sends to the Duke of Milan... . A couple of days ago there was also a muster of fifty mounted crossbowmen, equally destined for Milan. These will leave here within the next few days with one of the Duke's secretaries, who came here to enlist and pay them."⁴

At home, his colleagues seemed unflustered by these practical problems. 'I have no doubt at all,' Biagio Buonaccorsi wrote him, trying to buck him up – he was one of the under-secretaries at the Chancellery in Florence, and also a sympathetic auditor and good friend from pre-Chancellery days – 'that Her Excellency is doing you as much honour, and is as happy to see you, as you write,' betraying a hint of envy over his colleague's mission to the palace of the glamorous Caterina.

A gossip as well as confidant, Buonaccorsi had found out that copies of Caterina's portrait were circulating at Forlì. He wanted one, if possible undamaged: 'I would like you to send me by return mail a portrait on a sheet of paper of Her Majesty's head, many of which have been done over there; and if you send it, roll it up so that the folds do not spoil it.'⁵

With Niccolò away, the Chancellery offices slipped into rancid moods amid jealous backbiting. Stationed near Machiavelli's desk were Luca Fecini and Agostino Vespucci (a close relation of Amerigo (1451–1512), the eponymous financier of Columbus's voyages to the New World) and Antonio della Valle, another under-secretary, who had helped to secure Machiavelli's appointment, and Buonaccorsi's some three months later, in August 1498, and who devoted himself

to stirring up a hornet's nest of grievances that annoyed and rapidly offended everyone (Buonaccorsi wrote, 'I wish him bloody shit in his asshole'⁶).

Antonio's machinations often figured into Buonaccorsi's letters ('we were bawled out by our chiefs'), but Buonaccorsi himself had little respect for their chiefs in the Signoria, among whom office politics frequently overshadowed foreign policy, or many larger issues: 'I am pushed around ... by everyone, and I keep on begging and praying for you to come back.'

Relations at the Chancellery had turned more obnoxious ('since here no one else but him can be heard') and more ill-tempered by the day, though 'Marcello [has] heard your letters [his lengthy reports] being praised very highly.'⁷ Marcello was the Latin scholar Marcello Virgilio Adriani or di Adriani Berti (1464–1521), whom Niccolò may have known at university or through his likely contacts there, and who had headed up the First Chancellery since 1497. According to Buonaccorsi, the grave, reserved, purposeful, self-important Adriani was 'pushing' unceasingly for more troops to be dispatched to Pisa, or the military success of Niccolò's mission.

The Chancellery secretaries were nonetheless kept nose to the grindstone on the influx of reports of fresh wars breaking out not far away and seeming to confirm Dante's observation that northeast Italy was 'mai senza guerra' [never without war]: 'News is that the king [of France] has attacked Milan ... The Swiss and the Germans have come to blows during the last few days... . The Turkish fleet has issued forth from the strait, and it is thought it is going to strike Napoli di Romania; it is a great [formidable] thing ... And so [the] Signoria [of Venice] has made great preparations to defend itself and in addition has begun to give money to the men at arms it wants to use in Lombardy to attack Milan.'⁸

If the Republic's 'campaign in Pisa [was also] going better and better,' as Buonaccorsi informed him, by Machiavelli's lights his own mission seemed a failure. After receiving Caterina's consent to a 12,000-florin offer for the services of her son Ottaviano – he had originally proposed 10,000, as instructed, and then found himself teased ever higher – he watched icily as she reneged on her commitment a few days later. The reason, as she put it, was that since their bargain contained no guarantee that Florence would defend her principality, her son might as well not involve himself in the Pisan war at all. Machiavelli's irritation was scarcely eased by her telling him, even before turning down his offer, that in respect to her reputed supplies of ammunition and gunpowder, 'she had neither, and was herself greatly in need of them.'⁹

At that point, smoothly if without haste, he decided to leave, persuaded that his efforts had come to nothing. In his wanderings near Forlì, moreover, even before meeting Caterina, he had taken the trouble to interview a few of her subjects. As he told the Signoria, they attested to her and their other rulers' indifference to their welfare, or at least to their studied unconcern: 'It was only yesterday that a number of country people complained to me, saying, "Our lords have abandoned us; they have too many other things on their hands."'

In fact his mission had by no means been unsuccessful. The Signoria was happy enough with Caterina's vacillations, which only confirmed her need of a continuing alliance. It was also relieved to be excused from any obligation to the superfluous Ottaviano, and especially at no cost. From the Signoria's point of view as well, Machiavelli's previous mission, focused on Pisa, and undertaken back on 24 March, might also have been said to have produced better results than he realized.

He had not visited the city – to do so would have been dangerous – but, travelling on horseback, the town of Pontedera, at the confluence of the Era and the Arno, not far away, where he had dealt with the glib warlord-captain, Count Jacopo IV d'Appiano (1459–1510), governor of the seacoast town of Piombino as well as the islet of Montecristo and the ancient watery dominions of Elba and Pianosa, over which his family had for centuries exercised seigneurial rights. Appiano was one of the *condottieri* leading the Republic's Pisa forces.¹⁰

Before or after leaving Florence, but in his capacity as Secretary to the Ten of War, Machiavelli had also submitted to the Ten and the Signoria an evaluation, several paragraphs long, of the Pisan military situation. A terse, steely and even startling document, especially in view of his meagre experience to date in the area of military analysis, it may be his earliest surviving foray into strategy, tactics and the odds favouring battlefield success. It seems to have won him approval, if not admiration.

Described (perhaps by him or by someone else at the Chancellery, who might have added its title later) as *Discorso fatto al magistrato dei dieci sopra le cose di Pisa* (Discourse prepared for the Magistrates of the Ten on the issues having to do with Pisa), his analysis was apparently not intended for publication. On the contrary, it seems a fragment in which the author tackles his subject simply by sailing straight into it and without any preliminaries, indicating that it may have been intended for internal circulation among the officials in charge of the war.

He begins by arguing that the proper premise of any discussion of Pisa ought to be whether the city can be retaken ('riavere') by force or by diplomatic and

affectionate appeals ('o forza o l'amore'), 'whether it can be reoccupied by siege or might yield in some voluntary way.' In dismissing the latter, he underscores the persistent bitter feelings, amounting to outrage and firmly established by then among many on both sides in the midst of what had become an erratic, if protracted and bloody war.¹¹

Bernardo Scala, in an essay published in 1496, *Defence against the Detractors of Florence*, had vented a similar bitterness with respect to Pisa: 'What did we not do to assist Pisa? What did they think of or demand that was not generously given? Taxes were rescinded. Posts of honour and magistrates were allowed to continue in place as if Pisa were free... . [Yet] the Pisans revolted, and just at a moment when we needed their constancy and courage. They seized the chance when our republic was struggling to maintain its liberty, and when they owed us help in a crisis, they chose instead to take up arms and start a war.'¹²

Of note is his tone of agonised bafflement, or his suggestion that any Florentine connivance at war had less to do with economic ambitions – despite Pisa's wealth as the Republic's major port – than with humiliation. A sacred trust had been broken. Philanthropy had been mocked. The modern reader might imagine that Scala's sensitivity to these slights was a pretence designed to mask Florentine pecuniary interests. No evidence to hand throws his sincerity into doubt, however, or the comparable role played by bitterness and other vindictive feelings, such as those produced by insults, not only in the war over Pisa but in other Italian wars throughout this period – Sixtus's Pazzi War comes readily to mind. In many of these conflicts, vanity seems more likely to provoke a military response than money, even if money is to be made as a result. A sense of outrage often trumps squalor as an inducement to slaughter.

The rest of Machiavelli's analysis centres on how the battle for Pisa ought to be organized, whether from two or three reinforced military encampments, how many hundreds of men each might require, where they ought to be placed, or on which strategic heights, together with the optimal quantity of cannon necessary for any victorious siege or blockade. He has no doubt that the city's resistance will be stiff, and also none that a Florentine triumph can be expected as the massive outer wall is pierced by barrages and as assaults are pushed through it. Bitterness has been converted into strategy.

These, at any rate, were his points of concentration, elaborated by an accumulating and to a large extent professional technical knowledge, as a few months

before visiting Caterina, in March, he rode out to meet the *condottiere* Jacopo d'Appiano. It seems evident, in other words, that he had already spent a good deal of time studying the methods of siege warfare, or discussing its tactics with returning soldiers and military supply experts.

Expertise by itself was always insufficient, though, and a more delicate question in respect to Appiano, whose camp had by then begun to bulge with soldiers, centred on his reliability. Not only had he fought on behalf of double-dealing noble families and other rival cities in the recent past, including Pisa itself, but he had now begun to demand – the immediate reason for Machiavelli's visit – an exorbitant additional payment for his services, or 5,000 florins (ducats) beyond the already agreed if breathtaking 22,400. His grounds were that one of Florence's other *condottieri*, Count Rinuccio da Marciano, had been granted the larger sum.

Machiavelli's instructions from the Ten of War took stock of their financial rivalry, plus the fact that from the start of his employment, in August 1498, Appiano had tried to alter others of his negotiated terms. He had put off showing up at the Florentine camp until February 1499: he had requested forty men beyond the 200 that he had agreed to provide (an infantryman could cost as much as fourteen lire, seven soldi: any substantial increase in their number was bound to strain the Republic's dwindling war-chest): and at the moment, or since his arrival in camp, and without warning, he had started pushing his request for a pay rise.

Machiavelli had been ordered to yield on none of these matters, or to equivocate and mislead Appiano in respect to all of them:

You will ... show our favourable disposition towards his Lordship, but you will do so in vague and general terms, so as not to commit us to any positive obligation whatever.

Among the hesitations of those back in Florence, or those managing the war, as surely with Machiavelli, lay an awareness of their vulnerability, that a capable mercenary officer might not fulfil the terms of his contract and so dissipate the chances of success: 'Above all you must have patience if he should threaten a rupture, and let him run on, and then reply, and also use your best efforts to induce him also to have patience.'¹³

The threat of a break in their strained relations, or of Appiano's walking out and taking his troops with him, and delaying or even cancelling the possibility of victory – or, worse, of his switching sides – could hardly be taken lightly.

It accounted for the peering-over-the-shoulder quality in the instructions themselves.

In the end, moreover, as seems apparent, the Ten's mistrust is also better understood as traceable to something more momentous. This too demands acknowledgement, if only because it guided and prodded the actors in the entire drama flickering about to Pisa. Not too surprisingly, perhaps, it reflected the shifting world of armies and politics at the moment, in which not much – not friends, enemies, allies and goals – seemed remotely clear or secure, in which military relations might be perceived as mere smeary fluctuations.

Wriggling through the Pisan conflict was an unfamiliar uncertainty that in fact seemed to be turning into the premise of a far larger aspect of human behaviour. Its result, as some had begun to realize, was the perverse promotion of uncertainty itself as a value. A major purpose of Machiavelli's mission, in other words, or of the negotiations on which he had been dispatched, was precisely to maintain a decent confusion.

Herein lay realism, or what might be understood as a newly fashionable realism. In nudging Appiano into accepting his agreed payment despite his sulking Achilles-like in his tent – a solution which Machiavelli achieved by referring to the minimal amounts of cash available – enough might be accomplished, or as much as could be expected, to allay for a while the commander's unacceptable insistence on more troops.

The Military Quandary

A novel order of management, or as may today be conceded, a dramatic realignment of the mechanisms for administering armies, weapons and politics, had for some time been tilting into view. This development of an almost intangible condition of continuous political as well as military uncertainty seemed even to filter through the foundations of human hostilities. Armies, as always guides to the various mysteries of violence, themselves seemed to reflect new, unattached doubts. Novel shadows leapt and sank, along with cautiously examined fears. Nor is noting their strength meant to suggest that the new slipperiness had never existed before – it had – only that in fresh and ghostly forms it was now coalescing into the habitual.

Along these lines, the Ten's instructions to Machiavelli appear less as guides than political barometers. They attest to social and military fractures. Beyond them lay a novel and increasingly influential nervousness.

A pale hint of infinity – philosophy's great unmentionable during the Middle Ages – loomed as a glittering potential shadow on an advancing historical horizon. When at length, a century and a half later, its mesmerism had expanded, it would tempt many into less fanciful choices than those available in a static universe. Until then the new and fashionable state of unknowing would seem increasingly intense.

There was more. In a counter-reaction that may today appear natural, the growing status of instability had already begun to foster yearnings for its opposite, or absolute stability, often accompanied by a desire for military and even political absolutism.

Harsh, baffling acts, such as switching sides in a war, might imply an easy escape: an appeal to a charismatic, absolutist commander, one possessed of wealth as well as astuteness, a militaristic Savonarola, or panacea, a miracle- and victory-maker, able to redeem the virtues of the medieval past amid the military and political unease of the present. A dictator-type might rescue various

weakening older values, if by ruthless means, and even at the cost of what might today be seen as political freedom.

The latest Florentine nights in any case seemed obscure enough to thousands of devoted *Piagnoni*, among whom the memory of Savonarola still provided a ceaseless inspiration. Not only had no Florentine leader emerged to replace him, but lawlessness invested the streets. As early as June 1498, or shortly after the friar's death, Landucci recorded a spate of unusual murders and feuds that rattled the nights. They seemed to be linked to the amusements of restless young men. Skeletal, violent, dancing figures wandered amid the shadows. 'Everyone,' he observed, was indulging in 'a vicious life, and at nighttime one saw halberds or naked swords all over the city, and men gambling by candle-light in the *Mercato Nuovo* [New Market] and everywhere without shame. Hell seemed open; and woe to him who should try to reprove vice.'¹

Among these men, and perhaps better accounting for their behaviour than Landucci's assumption of a mere collapse in morals, there could also have been detected in the aftershock of Savonarola's death a new, shabby war-induced civil paralysis. As the demands of war rolled over everyone, and as the military uncertainties seemed to expand, near riots erupted over the taxes levied to pay for the unending battles, or to satisfy the hunger for soldiers, gunpowder and cannon.

The Ten of War were derided as spendthrifts. For a while the committee was in effect disbanded, or left with no elected replacements to its membership, though as a result Machiavelli's position as secretary became not only more secure but more prominent. Everywhere political squabbles hung on suspicions of the Republic's *condottieri*, or soldier-profiteers.²

Municipal wonders sprang up anyway, apparently offering moments of contact with the divine. As no epoch, even the most unstable, is probably without its ideas of marvels, shivers, quakes and calms, no message without strains, either tormented or lyrical, no whisper without echoes of grief, so on 10 June 1498 Landucci noted the miraculous-seeming appearance 'on the meadow of the *Servi* and the *Tiratoi* [the large open structures for drying and stretching cloth],' just downstream from the Ponte Vecchio, of golden caterpillars with human faces, or 'eyes and nose, [and] seeming to have a crown on their head, and round their face a diadem (a halo).'

Equipped with golden bodies and black tails, the never-before-seen creatures set about devouring all plant life: 'The sloe-bushes became white and peeled.'

Many believed that the caterpillar-like animals must be allegorical manifestations of Savonarola himself. They seemed to express a heaven-sent truth that his life had been golden. In its aftermath the 'weeds [had to] be rooted out; and thus the sloe, appearing to be the most useless and disagreeable, was to be consumed by the [caterpillars'] tail[s], that is to say, by those who came after.'³ The bizarre beings vanished, but for a while they seemed to evoke an older, faith-inspired if dying and medieval way of perceiving reality as a kind of tapestry of allegories. In their wake the city's ancient precincts felt abandoned anew, as if a great belief had sunk backwards.

Also in their wake, historical precedents extending back over a century, but still as potent as threatening, seemed to anticipate uncertainties seeping into many lives. Educated merchants, noblewomen and tradesmen, together with people in government and the Church, recalled not only the executions following on the Pazzi Conspiracy but abetted by Leonardo Bruni's well known *History of the Florentine People*, an early and often consulted bestseller, the horrifying 'internal discord following immediately upon external peace' in 1378, with its swarm of riots and its 'rashness of an aroused mob.'⁴ Novel-seeming terrors appeared to have been sparked by a devotion to violence for its own sake, or to a newly fashionable, frightening yet plausible god of panic.

Arriving during one of the first class-inspired rebellions of modern times, the panic-god had fostered a topsy-turvydom:

[A] mob, growing in size plundered the palace of the podestà. Then, still gripped with fury, it went back to the Palace of the Priors. It compelled the priors to abdicate their magistracy and sent them home, reduced to the condition of private citizens The mob itself [next] entered the Palace in victory On the very same day an assembly of the people was called which passed numerous new laws regarding the governance of the state. The principal innovation was that the Standard-Bearer of Justice should in perpetuity be chosen from the lowest class.⁵

The surreal-seeming, surprising and primitive revolution had collapsed on itself, crushed and stared down by the Republic's better-armed, better-trained and more determined citizens. Yet its ghoulis demonstration of society up-ended remained 'an eternal example and warning for the city's leading citizens that they should not allow civil unrest and armed force to come down to the whims of the mob. For it cannot be restrained once it begins to snatch the reins and realizes that it is more powerful, being more numerous.'⁶

Murderous attacks by night reawakened disquieted souls to the same terrors, especially as by 1499 all the old mob-defying formulas seemed less effective. In a frightened social world, which in significant ways seemed unfamiliar to everyone, people seemed to be preparing for the worst.

Machiavelli returned from Forlì on 1 August 1499, just as news arrived that the Republic's mercenary army had advanced on Pisa. At least the war-situation was improving. This possibility was reinforced on 6 August, as a single thunderous artillery bombardment restored confidence in the entire campaign, even if the new optimism soon proved false. On the sixth, scores of cannon under the direction of Paolo Vitelli, the *condottiere* in charge, tore a forty-yard-long gash in Pisa's outer wall. Everyone now hourly expected that other reports would start pouring in, confirming that street fighting was in progress or announcing that the city had fallen.⁷

Vitelli had been appointed to his position in an elaborate ceremony on 1 June 1498, and was universally viewed as competent, energetic and cruel. As a lord of Città di Castello in Umbria, he harboured a well-nigh universal aristocratic prejudice against the use of personal fire-arms in battle, chiefly the musket-like, inaccurate arquebus, deeming any such weapons unsoldierly, though he did not oppose the use of more destructive cannon and mortars.

As recently as the battle of Buti, a year earlier in 1498, which he had won, he had ordered that the hands of any captured Venetian gunners, or *schiopezzieri*, be chopped off, according to his belief that they had betrayed a military code of honour by resorting to guns brutal enough to eject an armoured knight from his saddle over some distance, and even kill him, without engaging in actual combat.⁸ More worryingly, Vitelli was often accused of consorting with the Pisan enemy as well as with Piero de' Medici and other members of the Medici family, whose appetite for returning to power was widely seen as dangerous. Despite these problems, Vitelli's handling of the war seemed to produce solid results. His tactics propelled his troops forward, after delays and excuse-making, matched by what seemed their proper imperial strut.

Along with his brother, Vitellozzo, and a rival *condottiere*, Rimiccio da Marciano – and given that both brothers had been buoyed by a plan of action approved by Florence's Grand Council after a rancorous debate – he seemed to expect victory over Pisa after his impressive capture of Cascina. His mere appearance in a nearby field, accompanied by 200 heavily armed crossbowmen,

had so frightened the Pisan commanders that they and their soldiers had cut and run. Their collapse had made possible his thrust at Pisa itself.

His preparations for the anticipated final assault were also complemented by his seizing the Rocco di Stampace, a major Pisan fortress, on 10 August. At exactly that moment, however, and without explanation, he had engaged in so humiliating a display of military cowardice, or incompetence, so it seemed, as to provoke suspicions of his loyalty, or at least his commitment to success. Worries about his behaviour infected the streams of rumours already circulating in the Florentine marketplaces. A riotous population, exasperated by previous military failures, was more interested in venting its frustrated rage than in fair play. No less disturbed seemed Machiavelli himself, who had developed the morbid conviction that Vitelli must be a traitor.

The chief reason was that he had enjoyed an insuperable advantage once he took Stampace and with heavy guns punched a gash in Pisa's outer defences. Inexplicably, it appeared, he had failed to seize his chance by ordering his troops to storm the city itself. Inexplicably, too, he had procrastinated, even turning back, and according to some accounts quarrelling with his men, who wanted to push on, rushing in among them to force their retreat.⁹

Whatever the motive for this carnivalesque behaviour, he continued to delay. To be sure, his success itself may have startled him, and the reason may not have been disloyalty. A batch of indignant letters from the Signoria exhorting him to get on with the job, however (these letters, referring to his 'shufflings' and 'deceit,' may have been written by Machiavelli), produced no change, and in the end nature, or *Natura*, or *Fortuna*, seemed to take the upper hand. An outbreak of malaria among his troops, spreading death left and right, including among his officers, forced his withdrawal on 14 September. Once more Pisa was left to the Pisans, who had recovered sufficient pluck to renew their struggle.

Vitelli's end now followed with frightening swiftness. Machiavelli was probably present at the secret Signorial discussions where it was decided to trick him into riding back to Cascina, there to arrange his arrest and return to Florence for quizzing and punishment. His brother and collaborator Vitellozzo, who was also a wanted man, sensed the danger and at the last minute managed to escape.

At 10:45 on the night of 29 September, the stern and proud Paolo Vitelli, surrounded by a squad of torch-bearing guards, found himself wrangled in chains into the Florentine grand *piazza*. Through the night and into the next day, he was tortured on the *strappado*, and afterwards hustled through a

perfunctory trial.¹⁰ During all this, he said nothing and admitted nothing. To most citizens, his silence, which in less disorderly circumstances might have seemed admirable, only confirmed his guilt. The new King of France, Louis XII, confirmed it too, accepting without hesitation reports of Vitelli's 'deceit.'

The trial itself smacked more of prejudgement and spite than judiciousness, even if Machiavelli urged a judicious approach. The diabolical situation was inflamed by a military catastrophe surrounding the breakup of the *condottiere's* camp at Pisa, during which ten packed barges, loaded with ammunition and artillery, sank in the Arno. They were later salvaged, but not before much of their cargo was stolen by the Pisans.

Less than a day after his forcible return to Florence, therefore, and on being found guilty of treason, Vitelli was beheaded in the Palazzo della Signoria, high up in the *ballatoio*, as Landucci reports, or the gallery behind the parapet, allowing the crowd below in the dark to catch a glimpse of his last moments: 'It was expected that his head would be thrown down into the Piazza; it was not thrown down ... but it was stuck on a spear and shown at the windows ..., with a lighted torch beside it, so that it could be seen by everyone. Then the people dispersed, considering that justice had been done, to the great honour of the city.'¹¹

Machiavelli supported these acts and sentiments, taking what seems a self-righteous pleasure in the aristocratic soldier's beheading. When a few weeks later an unknown Chancellery Secretary in Lucca wrote disparagingly of the – as he saw it – precipitous, unethical treatment of the Republic's hired commander, Machiavelli answered him in a letter in which sarcasm, bitterness and petulance, perhaps for the first time in his correspondence, expose his pitiless condemnation. Accusing the official of 'mark[ing] so great a republic as ours with opprobrium,' he adds: 'I choose to ignore the maliciousness ... that your letter makes manifest.' He cites 'Vitelli's betrayal' and the 'countless troubles [that] have befallen our [military] campaign due to his culpability.' As Secretary of the Ten of War, he seems uninterested in questions having to do with the flimsy evidence presented at a hasty trial: 'Whether he committed one wrongdoing or the other or whether he committed them both, [he] deserves endless punishment.' Toleration of uncertainty had its limits.¹²

On the Move with the French King

Machiavelli's father, Bernardo, died at about seventy on 10 May 1500 (he had been born c.1425–30).¹ His death left Niccolò, as one of his two surviving sons, and according to the terms of his father's will drawn up in 1483, the heir with his younger brother Totto to the family's several houses in Florence. By extension and custom, though they were not mentioned, he became heir as well, along with Totto, who was preparing for the priesthood, to the familial estates in Sant'Andrea in Percussina.² Provisions for their two sisters, in the event that they had remained unwed, had been made too, but Margherita, like Primavera, was by this time married, to one Bernardo Minerbetti.

While no record remains of Niccolò's mourning his father's death, it is worth recalling his strong boyhood relations with his affectionate first teacher, and his father's well-documented pride in his son's childhood achievements. Also worth citing is one of Niccolò's early lyric poems. Its date is uncertain, though it was probably written in his early to mid-twenties, and in the form of a jesting sonnet addressed to his father, then off at his farms and vineyards at Sant'Andrea. An odd piece of drollery, it consists of twenty lines, and is thus a *caudate* or 'tailed' sonnet in which a set of six added lines is by convention usually satirical. The poem brims with the flavours of feasts given and denied and family joshing.

Bernardo, apparently worried that his sons back in Florence, or just below the hills, might not be eating well enough, has sent Niccolò a goose. Niccolò responds with an exaggerated, if not absurd, description of their supposedly miserable city diet. The reference to Daniel in lines 10–11 is likely to a tradition, popular in those days and so familiar to many, that as the half-millennium approached confused the biblical prophet with recent books of the prophecies of Daniel, as they were called. These latter, which had been of interest to Savonarola, had to do with the reinvention and rejuvenation of the corrupt Church, the former with the Prophet Daniel's rejection (I, 5–16) of rabbinically

unblessed food at the court of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, so that he might go on waxing healthy and (presumably) holy:

Niccolò Machiavelli to M. Bernardo his father

In the villa at San Cascano

They've been living a month or more

on nuts, figs, beans and dried meat

so it's a positive evil and no joke

to linger on here like this any longer.

Just as the Fiesolan ox, full of yearning, peers

down at the Arno, thirsty, licking his lips,

so they gaze at the peasant wife's eggs for sale

and the butcher's mutton and beef.

But to make sure that even the maggots don't starve

I must address a word to Daniel,

who may already be reading something in our favour.

Because forced to eat bread with a knife [stale bread]

we're now growing beaks as long as woodcocks'

and cannot keep our eyes more than half open.

Tell that brother of mine

to drop by to triumph with me

over that goose that you sent us last Thursday.

If this game goes on,

messer Bernardo, you'll keep buying

ducks and geese but never get to eat them.³

Perhaps most pleasurable in these stanzas is the sly conversational mastery, influenced by Dante and Petrarch, of *terza rima* (9–14; not shown in translation), and the possibility that the poem may be part of a *tenzone*, in which the author awaits a lost reply in a sonnet game that Bernardo would have understood and would have enjoyed. The poem's earthy irony, combined with affection and technical ease, also gleams with an unsurprising empirical delight in experimental, vivid images, frankness, kindness and unlimited curiosity.

In mid-July 1500, a wide world to the north, spreading across the sophisticated and better organized kingdom of France, opened itself, and for the first time, to his curiosity as well. The court of Louis XII (1462–1515), later to become

known as *Père de la France*, despite an untidy string of ham-fisted military defeats, was often on the move and, like that of his predecessor, Charles VIII, involved in Italy through French military adventurism. This had to do with Louis' claim to Milan, but not only to Milan: to Naples.⁴

From his reign's earliest days, the King had resented Charles's failure to hang on to the south-Italian kingdom, and the embarrassment of his near defeats as he retreated north into France. On the other hand, the French countryside, with its immense, lush and golden farms and vineyards, punctuated at intervals by elegant chateaux both ancient and modern, could boast during this period of the King's greatest good fortune both a peasantry and nobility mostly content, or at a minimum eating well, dressing better and unwilling to rebel against a royal government seen as compassionate.⁵

As with any interesting culture, rigid contradictions abounded within that of the French. Some of them attracted Machiavelli's eye as shortly after his father's death he set out on horseback, riding by post, or relays of horses, to present himself according to his latest orders as a diplomat-sojourner at Louis's court, then stopping in Lyons.

The French response to the late-medieval English invention of long bows, for instance, had been to increase the weight and strength of the bolt-and-plate armour still worn by their knights. The result was that French infantrymen were left exposed at a distance of roughly 200 metres to squadrons of English archer-enemies whose steel-tipped arrows showered forth in successive swarms of death.

Major advances in tapestry-making and other products of the large French looms, along with reinforcing the relative political freedom of the property-owning townspeople, improving the methods of iron manufacture and designing better ships, had not yet led to the efflorescence of art and literature that would announce the French Renaissance.⁶

The sonnet, perfected in Italy over the previous two-hundred years, was read in Italian or in French translations, including in their audiences Louis XII, who may have been among the first in France to enjoy Petrarch more as a poet than as a moralist, a sign of a shifting fashion. It failed, however, to attract home-grown imitations: no sonnets by French poets survive from before the 1540s.

The long-standing rivalry between French and Italian culture over literary and philosophical pre-eminence showed no signs of ebbing: French humanists regarded themselves as the direct 'heirs of the Athenians.' They bizarrely omitted from descriptions of their heritage all reference to ancient and medieval Rome,

as well as to Italian accomplishments in the arts, philosophy and serious science, including pharmacology. Members of Louis's court usually imagined themselves cleverer than the ruling Italians, chiefly because none had as yet exhibited much enthusiasm for inventing a centralized government.⁷

Even the Roman Pope, Alexander VI, the former Roderigo Borgia (1431–1503), seemed sympathetic to French fantasies of Italian submission. Scarcely missing a beat after Louis's lavish coronation, he had dispatched his virile, masterful son, Cesare, to meet the new King, assuring the French of his military cooperation in pursuing their claims to the Italian city states that caught their eye.

In October, 1498, Louis had welcomed Cesare to his elegant, peripatetic court, referring to him as Cesar, as the young, Spanish-born commander wished to be designated (and as he signed his name to documents), evoking the arrogance of the ancient, assassinated Roman Dictator. By then, through a tit-for-tat annulment of Louis's marriage, arranged by Cesare's father, he was able to negotiate for the hand (in May, 1499) of one of the King's nieces, the beautiful Carlote d'Albret.

The principality of Valence was tossed into the matrimonial hopper as a wedding present. It was buttressed by annual revenues for Cesare's private use, plus a 2,000-strong French cavalry unit to complement his infantry and armed horsemen. The aim of this largesse was to guarantee his assistance in providing hoped-for French victories at Milan and Naples.⁸

As so often in Italy, anarchy prevailed over good sense. During the previous eight years, or since the death of Lorenzo de'Medici in 1492, Machiavelli had not only cultivated the contacts that now assisted his career but nurtured both amid the sickly atmosphere of the shattered Italian peace.

Abetting its collapse, or what Francesco Guicciardini was to describe as the elimination of Italian prosperity, geography itself, or the relative Italian isolation, as opposed to the general accessibility of France and other European countries, played a crucial role.

The long, mountainous peninsula, situated at the heart of Europe and containing remnants of the demolished Roman Empire, had not since the Middle Ages managed to come together as a lasting new empire or country. At present it looked unlikely to become either, though during the years under Lorenzo it had profited from the Italian League established by him between Florence and Naples.⁹

His death had quickly undermined the Republic's Naples relations. Competing passions of the more important militaristic noble families, among them the Este, the Aragona (of Naples) and the Sforza, which prompted their leaders in the past to form and dissolve bellicose alliances, or even to invite foreign armies, especially French, German and Spanish, to invade Italy to satisfy their infatuations with conquest, seemed once more free to do as they pleased. They began to stimulate a broad descent into unimagined depths of theft and murder.

Throughout most of this time, effective military tactics had depended not only on the peninsula's relative isolation but also on an almost natural, accomplice-like secrecy. Battles exploded among small rocky glens, dales, narrow valleys and mountain passes. They thrashed against the siege-nets thrown about towns and cities.

Since ancient Roman times, the most significant Italian military collisions had tossed back and forth at lightning speed. A dread of daylight- as well as night-attacks had led travellers to limit their excursions. Gangs of brigands lurking at the roads were more threatening to the forest wanderer, itinerant, artisan or diplomat, on the move by horse or walking, than most military flare-ups.

Hired soldiers often seemed indistinguishable from thieves and killers. Nationalism was unknown, though a good many soldiers, including soldiers for hire, espoused religious ideals. Loyalty to local noblemen, noblewomen or the Church might on occasion rise into a smothering of sadistic impulses.¹⁰

Machiavelli packed Caesar's *Gallic Wars* into his traveller's saddlebag in preparation for his first journey out of Italy, perhaps taking the slim volume for the pleasures of its lucid Latin prose, or even as a jokey antique tourist guide, though his instructions from the Signoria stipulated speed, as a war was underway, rather than reading. Did he have in mind some prospect of running into Cesare Borgia, either at Louis's court or en route – a vague possibility – or imagine that the war-memoirs of the long dead Roman Caesar would provide useful insights into his modern imitator?¹¹

As ever, the Signoria's decisions about policies and manoeuvres hinged on Pisa. The Secretary of the Ten had in fact just returned from a recent, risky mission to the Florentine camp 'before Pisa' (not Vitelli's camp, which had been broken up), to which he was dispatched in June as an aide serving the Republic's commissioners, Giovanni Battista Ridolfi and Lucas degli Albizzi. There he had been ordered to oversee the deployment of 5,000 Swiss troops and 500 lancers.

These professional-looking reinforcements had been sent on loan from Louis XII. In line with Florence's gratitude for French military support, but coming at the expensive rate of 24,000 ducats per month, they were charged with propping up the Pisan siege, or carrying on where Vitelli had left off in his apparent self-defeat.

Even this sizeable contingent of troops, however, had begun to tack and feint in movements ranging from the embarrassing to the dangerous. The Swiss commanders had immediately launched a bombardment of the weakened Pisan walls, which had been repaired, and next, as if following Vitelli's lead and even echoing his incompetence or confusion, plunged into a retreat, amid shouting, riots, recriminations, stabbings and shootings.

The Florentines had not paid them, and their reaction was more violent than any animosity they might have tried but failed to direct at the Pisans. 'The commissioner [Lucas degli Albizzi] wrote you yesterday evening,' Machiavelli reported to the Signoria 'from the camp before Pisa' on 9 July, 'about the [terrible] condition of things in which we find ourselves here; and today at three o'clock there came about one hundred Swiss to his quarters and demanded pay, ... saying that they would not leave without being paid. The commissioner could not pacify them with words or promises, so that after much disputing they have carried him off prisoner.'¹²

The abduction of his superior officer, along with other Italian officers, and right before his eyes, left him shaken and in the dark about what to do, apart from requesting help: 'I have remained at the station of San Michele, so as to be able to give your Lordships this information, that you may take measures to prevent one of your citizens, with so many of his people, all your subjects, from being carried off, and by whom!'¹³

With enraged Swiss troops brandishing weapons about the commissioner's head, kidnapping him and threatening him with death for hours on end ('I know not,' he jotted down in terror, 'whether in the last hour of my life (which God grant may be soon!) I shall suffer one fourth of the pain and affliction which I feel at this time'), he had still maintained his level-headedness. Eventually in fact, he had arranged his own relief, as no other seemed possible, in the form of a signed ransom note stipulating his commitment to pay the mutinous soldiers over 1,300 ducats.¹⁴

The upshot of his concession to the rebellion, to which Machiavelli bore witness, was that the Swiss at once abandoned the Florentine camp and in their nattily dressed thousands began heading north toward Bologna. The prospects of any quick assault on Pisa had vanished into thin air.

The French had immediately blamed the Florentines for the mutiny and kidnapping, the Florentines the French for the indiscipline of their mercenaries. The King offered apologies: 'We have been informed only a few days since of the great disorders ... in the army engaged in the siege of Pisa, in consequence of the mutiny and quarrel of several ill-disciplined bodies of infantry ... which occurrence has caused us ... much regret.'¹⁵

He had promised extensive new backing for Florence in the war, but had then done nothing. The Pisans, meanwhile, began staging well-planned attacks of their own, capturing the town of Librafatta, along with a nearby fortress. For the first time, too, they had begun to receive supplies from neighbouring Lucca, and in part because of the resulting shift in their prospects – from hopeless to not so bad – a vicious circle of recriminations between the Signoria and the French court turned into squabbling as each side became more hostile and volatile by the day.¹⁶

Since Machiavelli had been present at the mutiny, his contribution to resolving the crisis affecting the fragile alliance seemed only appropriate. Along with Francesco della Casa, an experienced diplomat-replacement for the previous Florentine envoy to Louis's court, now recalled, he was ordered into France on a mission to smooth the severely ruffled French feathers. If possible, they were to re-establish good relations between their governments: 'The whole of this matter,' argued the Signoria, 'consists of two parts, viz.: first, to complain ... and second, to defend and exculpate... . It will ... be proper for you to speak of the capture of our commissioner, of the persons guilty of this outrage, and of [how] it was done, and of the outrages and insults we have had to bear.'¹⁷ More than anything, the emissaries were to encourage solid French commitments to supporting Florence in any future assaults on Pisa itself.

From the start, though, as Machiavelli and della Casa set off on their more than 500-mile journey into the north, they faced an annoying problem: tracking down and locating the French court. The whole of French aristocracy appeared to disappear as King Louis and his aides reassembled for hunting and feasting expeditions, or without notice slipped off in unannounced directions, acceding to his command that they avoid any areas where epidemic disease, such as plague, might be in progress. Unintentionally but confusingly, the court and King kept days ahead of the Florentines, who over weeks spent trotting after them arrived too late in town after town, exhausted, sweating, poorer and vexed with the unending need to buy fresh horses.

Starting at Lyons, Machiavelli and della Casa straggled breathlessly into

villages such as St Pierre le Moutier, only to be informed that the King had just left. From St Pierre, on 5 August, Machiavelli dashed off an early irate appeal to Florence for more money, an almost insolent message focusing on his frustration with traipsing about the French countryside and the hardships of day after day swinging back into the saddle, plus his dismay as his diplomatic hopes, not to mention his purse, flattened into floppy nothings: 'Your Lordships know what salary [twenty ducats per month] was assigned to me on our departure from Florence, and also the amount accorded to Francesco della Casa [much more]. Doubtless [it was set up in the] belief that in the natural course of things I would have occasion to spend less money than Francesco. Such however has not been the case: for not finding his Most Christian Majesty at Lyons, I had to provide myself with horses, servants and clothing, the same as he; and thus following the court has obliged me to incur the same expenses as Francesco.'¹⁸

His financial problems were formidable: 'I trust your Lordships will take such measures as will not ruin [me] and that at least I may be credited in Florence with the amounts for which I am compelled to become indebted here. For I pledge you my faith that up to the present moment I have [already] spent forty ducats of my own, and have requested my brother at Florence to make me an advance of seventy ducats more.'¹⁹

At Nevers on 6 August, Machiavelli and della Casa were finally received into the pausing if elusive royal cortège, although an audience with His Majesty, they were told, could not be announced for more than a day. Their first meeting with the King, on the other hand, proved almost as bewildering as the journey itself. Disregarding 'the fatigue and fear of sickness which prevails in this country,' the Florentine negotiators 'found [Louis] with a very small court, on account of the limited size of the place.'²⁰ They introduced themselves to his chief minister, Cardinal Georges d'Amboise of Rouen, who conducted them to a postprandial audience with the King, just awakening from his afternoon nap.

Everything appeared civil enough until Machiavelli, della Casa, Louis and the various officials settled into negotiations. These at once disintegrated into carping, blame-casting and bleak forecasts of a pointless military future in light of the failure at Pisa. An underlying sourness, barely concealed by everyone's good manners, came close to wrecking the chances of a resolution.

Nor were Machiavelli and della Casa able to prevent the serene firing off of sardonic accusations at the Signoria, or for that matter at what seemed to the French a Florentine ducking of their responsibility for what had happened, as

expressed in their refusal to pay the Swiss with money transferred through the King's good offices. Machiavelli and his fellow emissary seem nonetheless to have avoided the development of even deeper fissures.

The tenth of August saw Louis's court once more slipping into its mazy migrations, this time on a beeline for Montagis, with the Florentine legates in pursuit, and from Montagis to Melun, where the fraying negotiations were resumed amid inflexible cross-purposes.

Not everything was a waste, though, at least from Machiavelli's point of view: by late August Biagio Buonaccorsi, his friend and colleague at the Palazzo, had written with news that some hoped-for financial assistance had at last, if only in part, been arranged by his brother Totto.

Andrea di Romolo, another secretary at the second-floor Chancellery desks in Florence, also hinted, in a postscript to Biagio's letter, at jolly parties and an attractive woman – she is not identified – who Machiavelli might be missing, as perhaps after a hard day at the office: 'Anyway, we often laugh in the First Chancellery, and we also have a few little parties at Biagio's house... . So get ready yourself, as soon as you [return], ... for she is awaiting you with open figs [slang for sex], and Biagio and I saw her several evenings ago at her window like a hawk, you know who I'm talking about, *etc.: i.e.*, along the Arno by the Grazie.'²¹

Here at least was a touch of the human in the midst of his confusing French adventures, which despite their futility dragged on from September into October and then into November, with no money forthcoming from the Signoria after all, despite Totto's best efforts, and regardless of Biagio's and later his own assurance that it would be, and with little progress made towards arranging a Florentine-French *entente*.

Francesco della Casa now fell ill and left for Paris to recover. A replacement was supposedly *en route*, or so Machiavelli was informed, yet he was kept twiddling his thumbs at the French court without permission to return, and given almost no information about the future of his mission; only that, as before, he seemed to be missed most of all at the Chancellery.

'Return as soon as you can, I beg,' wrote Agostino Vespucci toward the end of October. 'Return posthaste, I pray; return as swiftly as possible, I beseech [you]'. Vespucci was tormented by his old worry that his friend might lose his 'place in the palace,' though he insisted that everyone simply had a 'desire to see you': 'Your amusing, witty, and pleasant conversation, while it echoes about our

ears, relieves, cheers, and refreshes us, who are spent and flagging from constant work.’

Machiavelli’s gifts of entertainment had so far brought him scant comfort in a French diplomatic environment where not knowing much of the spoken language (though he could read it and was apparently able to translate letters into it), he found it necessary to conduct most conversations in Italian, weaving into them the odd Latin phrase, or even a couple of Latin sentences.

Vespucci kidded him about the legendary French prudery: ‘Ripa [a mutual friend] added that there was no way you could stay in France, without grave danger, since sodomites and homosexuals are stringently prosecuted there. When we, who know your character is excellent and spotless, hesitated, and some asked what he meant, he muttered in reply that a horse had sodomized you and split your anus and buttocks (ah, what a crime!).’

Gratuitously, but no doubt because he knew that Machiavelli would be interested, he tossed into his letters dollops of economic and social news, about a nasty drop in grain prices and outbreaks of syphilis: ‘One man has lost his genitals or penis, ... another’s nose has fallen off, another has gone blind in one eye, another has become very much like Vulcan [lame].’

He allowed a note of pessimism to creep into his admiring, jittery remarks about Cesare Borgia, whom everyone referred to as the ‘Duke of Valentino’ in recognition of his acquisition of Valence as a gift from Louis XII. Cesare’s military ambitions, at the moment projecting his forces into one prize chunk after the other of central Italian territory, had begun to inspire considerable if not universal dread: ‘Valentino is accomplishing great marvels by himself along the Via Flaminia, and the rumour is spreading that when he has captured Faenza and Bologna, he will clear a path for Piero de’Medici to command ... a great state (a great crime).’²²

Vespucci’s reference to the Via Flaminia had to do with the superb highway, built during the régime of Gaius Flaminius, a Roman Censor in 220 BCE. Extending from Rome to Fani, it ran north along the Adriatic to Rimini. During Cesare’s second major campaign, just then pushing ahead at full tilt, he had decided to follow this symbolically vital route, more or less, though not without meeting fierce resistance.

‘May God,’ wrote Vespucci, thinking of a possible Borgia-Medici threat to Florence itself, and that Cesare, who might launch his troops into some dizzy leap across the peninsula, might attempt to re-establish a Medici dictatorship, ‘keep all evils from us, of which evils for (six years) we have had a great share.’

The brackets here, which are his own, allude to two lines in Virgil's *Aeneid* (II, 5–6) that Machiavelli would have recognized and which depict Aeneas recalling the devastation at the fall of Troy, when the Greeks had sacked the city, burning it to the ground.

The Long French Patience

‘This is the year of our misfortunes,’ Totto wrote to his ‘*Honoured brother, etc.*’ on 4 November. Machiavelli was still preoccupied with his efforts to resolve the uninterrupted silence surrounding his stay at the French court, as yet with no indication when he might be called back.

His sister, Primavera, he now discovered, had just died at the age of thirty five. Her son, Giovanni, aged thirteen, himself lay ‘dying at death’s door’ of ‘the same [unknown] disease.’ Totto believed that her son might survive, or at least live to reach his fourteenth birthday and so be legally old enough to make a will: in the Machiavelli family worries about property frequently ran in tandem with close affections.¹

By mid-November the French had relocated to Nantes, by late November to Tours. Machiavelli, who as before let Louis’s court set the pace for him on some recently purchased horse, noted that the embassies of other governments and courts – the Turkish, German, Venetian, Milanese – seemed constantly dancing before the King as in an expensive ballet, and deluging him with pleas for help.

In the face of this brisk competition, what influence might a mere Florentine secretary hope to achieve? In early October, and as he put it, with thanks to God, he found himself at last able to welcome a report of the ‘re-establishment of the Ten,’ or the unofficially disbanded committee of war: ‘Let us expect much good from it; for from a better government we have the right to hope for happier results.’²

The Ten’s new members might become the source of sounder policies in respect to Pisa, though all military decisions required debate and ratification by the less efficient, larger Council of Eighty. A War member’s term lasted for six months, as opposed to two months for a member of the Signoria, who could nonetheless stand for re-election.

Like many Florentines, Machiavelli had serious worries by now about the possible French encouragement of Cesare Borgia, though Louis had written to

him, making plain his hostility to any blackmailing excuses for invading the Republic. With growing reservations, Machiavelli had only minimal confidence that the new ambassadors now *en route* to relieve him and della Casa might revive the French interest in a strong military agreement between Florence and France. Its absence could risk the Republic's safety: 'If it does not very soon become known that your [the Signoria's] ambassadors are really coming, then his Majesty will be more inclined to believe the calumnies of [our] enemies than our justifications.'³

As Cesare's army mobilized at Faenza, and given the likelihood that after seizing it he would concentrate his attention on Florence, nurturing the French King's friendship had become more important than ever. Louis's influence on Cesare could be compelling, and perhaps most of all via his fickle papal father.

On 4 November in Nantes, Louis's minister, Cardinal d'Amboise, took Machiavelli aside, 'reflected a moment and said, "Preserve the friendship of the King, and then you will not need [him]; but if you lose his good graces, all the help [in the world] will not suffice you."⁴ Amid the skulking about at the nomadic French court, the Florentine Secretary's mere presence, or his 'becoming' manner, as he not immodestly put it in communiqués to the Signoria, might help to alleviate the unpleasant atmosphere of kingly denials. On the other hand, Louis would do nothing without being paid.

In the meantime, the chill autumn winds swept across the desolate French fields. They rustled through the royal tapestries rolled and unrolled for warmth and decoration on the monarch's perpetual journeys, often before glowing palace fireplaces that rarely supplied much heat. Outside, as November drifted into December, the latest crowded barn or tavern pitched its lights past scores of carousing soldiers.

François Villon (1431–63), the *déclassé* poet who had died to the north of this frozen country six years before Machiavelli's birth, had not celebrated nature or even the flocks of winter sheep to be glimpsed along the now almost deserted lanes, or the cows stranded among bursting icicles, only the salvations of sex, God and mead. His crazed rebelliousness had seemed resigned to Parisian gutters and alleys:

our doom
is, to be sifted by the wind,

heaped up, smoothed down like silly sands.

We are less permanent than thought.
The Emperor with the Golden Hands
is still a word, a tint, a tone,
insubstantial, glorious,
when we ourselves are dead and gone
and the green grass growing over us.⁵

Amid the frustrations of Machiavelli's mission to France, Italy to the south appeared to pause and wait. For what? In Florence on 21 November, a superb snowstorm, the likes of which 'had never been seen [before],' according to Landucci, descended for hours. Snow froze 'without the roofs dripping,' and lasted for days. After the quiet settled in, many of the city's boys filled up the streets with prides of sculpted snow-lions.⁶

Marriage and a Hint of Cesare Borgia

His permission to return, but only after informing the new ambassador, Pierfrancesco Tosinghi, who finally arrived, 'of all that you have done during your stay at court,' was signed by the Signoria and carried from Florence on 12 December.¹ Their letter took ages to reach him, as did his hundreds of miles ride home, and he was back in the familiar Florentine corridors and offices only on 14 January 1501.

Anxiety among the Signoria's officials about Cesare's no longer concealed intentions had stimulated an eagerness to settle up with the French, to the tune of an initial payment of 10,000 ducats. The Signoria promised that more would be sent without delay.

Machiavelli had now been gone for roughly five months. He returned to a slew of political and family problems, though with a bright spot among them: Giovanni, his nephew and the son of Primavera, had survived, as Totto had predicted, and was doing well. On the other hand, or so he had informed the Signoria as far back as 25 October, his personal life had fallen apart:

As you are aware, my father died a month before my departure, and since then I have lost a sister; and my private affairs are so unsettled and without order, that my property is in every way actually going to waste. I hope, therefore, that your Lordships will kindly grant my request [to return], so that I may in some measure restore order to my own affairs. I should want to remain in Florence only one month, after which I am willing to come back to France, or to go to any other place where it may please your Lordships to send me.²

His request, with its air of melancholy, had been ignored at the time, even if months later it was granted. Nor, from the viewpoint of the larger political and military perspective over the past few months, had the Republic itself been able to do more than hold its own.

Cesare Borgia, Pope Alexander VI's favourite if illegitimate son since his elder son Juan's murder in a Roman back alley on 14 June 1497, and his mangled body's deposit in the Tiber (many suspected by Cesare himself), though dependent for success on his father's religious authority, had come a long way since defeating Caterina Sforza at Forlì less than a year earlier, in January 1500. In the apprentice days of his career, Caterina's defiance had kept his soldiers busy for three gory weeks. Impelled by her hostility to Louis XII as well as to him personally, she had blasted away with artillery at her own town from its castle, the Rocca di Ravaldino, which bent over it like a gnarled grim fist. Defiant even in defeat and capture, though perhaps willing to take a useless chance on his compassion, Caterina may have surrendered her body to her conqueror. More likely, she kept a discreet silence after he raped her.³

Whatever the pirouette of their arrangements at her surrender, she was bundled off to Rome. There Cesare displayed her as his trophy-beauty prisoner before his gloating father. He too had admired her and wanted her, but after she still refused to cede her seigniorial rights to Forlì, together with those of her children – her defiance returned as rapidly as it had collapsed – she failed to avoid Cesare's tossing her into a prison cell at the Castel Sant'Angelo.

As with Caterina, Cesare nearly always took delight in superfluous double-dealing. The measure of his malicious if not outright evil personality was *Schadenfreude*, or taking endless pleasure in others' experiences of ghastliness. Along these lines, it should be noted that he might have done better with what became his ghoulish, meteoric rise into notoriety had he yielded with somewhat less readiness to the opportunities for treachery that came his way. Restraint might have quelled the massive revulsion.

Certainly it would have provoked fewer quests for vengeance. Revealingly, his portraits (see plate VIII) show a face flat, inflexible and good-looking – some said beautiful – as well as nervous. A colossal arrogance seems buttressed by infinite self-adoration. Omitting his sense of personal injustice, which he nurtured constantly, his soldierly astuteness, humanist education, contempt for his enemies, wit, love of painting, scorn of his helpful father and viciousness, it was a face that in milder circumstances might even have been taken for that of a court jester – or at least of someone unlikely to attract the devotion of battle-hardened troops.

Devoid of its brashness, aura and religious lustre – his father had appointed him Bishop of Pamplona at the age of fifteen, though he showed no particular

interest in religion – his *hauteur* might well have seemed naïve, despite its repertoire of unpleasant expressions.

Given his enjoyment of malignancy, his animosities might also, and just as relevantly, have been seen as demonic. Along with his limitless supply of pilfered money and the pride taken by his father in his military triumphs – he favoured capes, caps, gloves and doublets in clerical black to emphasize his authoritarian mystique – he seemed unquestionably magnetic. Those who met him remarked on his unwavering gaze, cleverness, impertinence and keenness of focus. He gleamed with charisma.

Another key to understanding him is that in a time of anarchy he proposed unity, if not peace. In the broader sense, therefore, his ferocity may not have mattered, at least to the humiliated populations that came under his metallic sway: any rivals, friends and enemies whom he traduced, enslaved, defeated and killed had already been well-schooled in ferocity by quite a few other *condottieri*.

During the years of his greatest influence on Italian politics, even ordinary people, had they been asked, and with few hesitations, might also have admitted to a wish for any unity at all, including that made available through violence, and at any cost, along with terror and murder. He himself preferred simple obedience.

During his theatrical entry into Rome, for instance, or midway through the elaborately staged semi-millennial celebrations of February 1500, his benign-seeming progress among the tens of thousands lining the bunting-decked streets to watch – many had walked hundreds of miles across Europe and Italy to be there – seemed more that of some streamlined ship gliding through unsettled waters than of a politician-soldier presiding casually over life and death.

A disorganized procession of priests, citizens and artisans seemed speared through by his disciplined, synchronized ranks of uniformed troops. His bodyguard of over a hundred grooms glittered in black velvet, black leather boots and new halberds. He rode at their centre, looking as always crisp, proud, clean, heaven-sent and invincible in his blacks on blacks. They winked with his single holy, gold medallion, as if proclaiming a new world order, or setting him off among surrounding craft that amounted to nothing.⁴

The year 1501 saw a flurry of insurrections throughout Republican territories. These Machiavelli and his colleagues made efforts to suppress. In several of

them, Cesare was involved as a co-conspirator in search of advantages and gaining them. In each, moreover, his proximity if not actual involvement challenged Florentine diplomatic skills and the Signoria's flimsy preparations. A few months later they had still not much improved. The Florentines as always seemed to respond far more adequately to economic, artistic, political and literary opportunities than to military threats.

Machiavelli's eagerness to help maintain the Republic's territorial integrity nonetheless remained at a high pitch, and so his being sent for the third time that year, in mid-July, in a silk-drenching and mind-inflaming heat wave of a sweaty Florentine summer, to deal with the worst of these insurrections, at Pistoia, if only for a few days, remains intriguing. It may seem especially so because at home he had begun to prepare for a dramatic change in his way of life: his marriage to Marietta Corsini.⁵

Snippets of details, or chancy clues, linger about his wife-to-be, whom he must have courted and wooed as he turned thirty-two, or not long after the deaths of his father and sister. Marietta was the daughter of Ludovico (Luigi) Corsini. Along with her sister, and not unlike the Machiavelli, she came from a down-at-heels (*di origine popolana*) branch of a noble family able to trace its roots into Florentine history, or over hundreds of years, as well as forward into the elite merchant classes of the fourteenth century. The Corsini had also made their way into more recent government circles. In 1500, Marietta's brother-in-law, Piero del Nero, was elected to the Ten of War, the committee for which Machiavelli acted as Secretary.

The infrequent references to Marietta in his letters and those of his friends probably indicate more about their discretion than any indifference. Without exception they confirm a vivid impression of a woman warm-hearted, affectionate, thoughtful and devoted. Machiavelli himself seems scarcely lacking in sincere feelings toward his wife, at least at first, and perhaps not later, although marriages in Florence and the Europe of his day were often whimsical, representing merely the most practical arrangement for producing children to enhance a family's name and its financial interests. With Machiavelli the possibility remains real enough that another issue mattered as much and perhaps more, as seems reinforced by the timing of the ceremony. Hints of his isolation among the rooms of the almost deserted *palazzo* at Via Guicciardini, where he continued to live, haunt about his desire for domesticity. Grief may also have weighed in. As is likely, Totto had probably left to take up his priestly duties elsewhere.

Agostino Vespucci's letter to him from Rome in August, 1501, sent either weeks before or after his wedding, whose precise date is unknown, is hardly meant (as some have said) to offer marital advice. Most of it is about Alexander VI, and serves up the usual no-holds-barred jesting in much of the two friends' correspondence:

And if His Beatitude the Pope should happen to [come up] there [to Florence], you and others who might want some dispensation, either to take or to leave your wives, will get it out of kindness of heart, *provided that your hand is loaded with money*.⁶

Vespucci here takes aim at Alexander's scrounging after cash and not at some imaginary annulment. His phrases sizzle with the ribaldry common between bachelor-comrades, one of whom has decided, perhaps cleverly and for the better, to alter the direction of his life.

Meeting the Captain-General

At the same time, the insurrection at Pistoia, based on an ancient feud between the town's leading families, the Panciatichi and Cancellieri – it harked back to the Middle Ages – erupted and spilled into the countryside. In Rome, Michelangelo had just begun work on his magnificent *Pietà*. In Venice, Aldo Manuzio had just published the first book in Italian boasting his newly invented italic typeface. In Pistoia, house-burnings followed the flight of the Panciatichi themselves and scores of deaths.

In Florence, 'the plague [was] increasing rapidly' while in early April 'there came [to the city]'; Landucci reports, 'ten citizens of Pistoia to explain to us their sad case.' A Florentine commissary, Niccolò di Tommaso Antinori, was dispatched to put down the disturbances.¹

He 'hanged certain rioters' – the accepted method of restoring order – but ineffectually, as the murders and arson continued. By the end of April, Cesare had captured Faenza, after at first and to his surprise being repulsed and driven back at the city's walls. By July Vespucci, 'gasping from the great heat ... in Rome,' where he had been sent by the Signoria, was offering Machiavelli, still in Florence, his acid take on Roman religious life, as he saw it: 'Aside from the [P]ope, who has his own illicit flock ... at all times, every evening, from vespers to seven o'clock, twenty-five or more women are brought into the palace riding pillion with some people, to the point where the entire palace has evidently become the brothel of every obscenity.' The Pope's hedonism seemed a mirror-image of Cesare's violence.²

Machiavelli soon found himself enmeshed in a blur of decisions that could well involve Florence's survival as an independent state. Sent off himself to Pistoia, with its own plague-reduced population of about 8,000, he realized that in view of the town's military value his reports home would be anxiously anticipated, if only because the strategic and diplomatic situation in north-central Italy – a far bigger picture – was altering as well.

It seemed to shift dramatically just as he left, and he faced the need of dealing with a murky undertow of manoeuvres set in motion by Cesare Borgia. The Duke's territorial encroachments had abruptly coincided with an ongoing Florentine need to mollify the French. As ever, if Louis was to remain an active ally, he required the lubricant of additional payments. To date the Signoria had doled out over 30,000 ducats to him in compensation for the Swiss mutiny. Louis himself, as unrelenting as ever in his imperial ambitions, now ordered south into Italy, by land and sea, an invasion-army of 21,000 men. His goal was finally to lay claim to his coveted Kingdom of Naples, ruled by Frederic of Aragon. With a French army on the march and plunging through village after village, he might easily thrust aside or annihilate any trivial resistance thrown up against him.

The King posed no threat to Florence as long as the payments continued – on the contrary, his presence was reassuring – but Cesare, hurrying south at the head of his own smaller if considerable battle force, had for the moment chosen ease of access as an excuse for entering fringe areas of the Republic. He planned to eviscerate Florentine authority by claiming territory that he would later annex to his papal-established state of Romagna.

As they went, his troops sacked and burnt stretches of farmland. If nothing else, doing so made plain his usual strategy of spreading terror for the sake of promoting his influence. His soldiers were perhaps urged to rape as well as to rob and steal (Louis by contrast ordered his troops to refrain from criminal acts, and they appear to have done so). Cesare's sexual terrorism, however, was apparently directed indiscriminately at women in the frightened towns and hamlets raided by his soldiers. It rapidly assumed the character of an actual policy. The monstrous, moreover, preceded the humiliating. A sense of Republican defeat spread through and beyond a score of ruined and abandoned Florentine villages. It poured into major population centres. It seemed on the brink of precipitating a *de facto* Republican collapse.

Even a partial domination of Florentine soil by Cesare's army, if unresisted, might induce a paralysis of fear. Its influence could lead to the restoration in Florence of a dictatorship under Piero de' Medici. Lorenzo's heir, as despised as ever, was rumoured to be waiting in nearby Bologna, impatient and estimating his chances.

Machiavelli had been present at the French court months earlier when Louis promised that any invasion by Cesare would not be tolerated: 'We have written in duplicate to our lieutenants in Italy that if the Duke ... should

attempt anything against the Florentines or the Bolognese, they should instantly march against [him], so that upon this point you may rest in perfect security.³ By now, though, the influence of the royal guarantee had faded. Cesare seemed on the brink of realizing his dream of a takeover.

At Pistoia, Machiavelli took stock of these implications of the increasing civic disorder. To pacify the town, since 1351 under Florentine control, he recommended that the family of the exiled Panciatichi, along with their supporters, be allowed to return. Reestablishing the previous civil society could well provide a natural barrier against a Cesare-led assault. A revival of the old arrangement also seemed appropriate, as both the Cancellieri and Panciatichi had for centuries represented rival but balancing factions engaged in a '*gara di uffici*' (competition over offices) in running the government.⁴

As a result, after several days in which he ordered those in positions of power to abandon their prohibition against the Panciatichi, he seems to have felt certain enough to return to Florence. The tangled situation was, if not clarified, at least calmer. By October, though, he was back. The medicine had not taken, and robberies, threats, shootings and murders had started up again on a more devastating scale.⁵

It may be impossible to establish whether Machiavelli could have resolved the Pistoian *impasse*. Nor is guesswork likely to be as illuminating as recognizing that he was entrusted with the attempt. The point of trust measures his appeal, or that he could be called on at a delicate juncture. If nothing else, it draws attention to the growing pleasure taken in his resourcefulness.

All of which may be critical in making sense of his assignment soon afterwards as secretary to Francesco Soderini, the Archbishop of Volterra and brother of Piero. Francesco had just begun to achieve prominence in the Republic's political affairs. He would also (though he did not know it) be elected *Gonfaloniere di giustizia* for life. At this point, or during the inauspicious summer of 1502, he was sent off to meet and negotiate with Cesare himself. Machiavelli's skills and experience were now to be put to even fuller use as the Signoria tried once more to call a halt to his advances.

By now too, or as early as June, Arezzo had rebelled against the Republic. An important Tuscan city in the Valdichiana (Chiana Valley), as well as a bustling northern neighbour of Cesare's patched-together state of Romagna, it had been encouraged by the Florentine indecisiveness. Other towns and cities in the area, Cortona and Sansepolcro among them, at once joined in.

The rising at Arezzo was decisively if not unexpectedly supported by the treacherous brother of the executed Paolo Vitelli, Vitellozzo. He had already been recruited as one of Cesare's *condottieri* and had taken control of a fair-sized body of troops, though Cesare with his usual cool duplicity denied their military relations. In Florence it was reported that Vitellozzo had been accompanied into Arezzo by Piero de' Medici, but Vitellozzo's appearance alone served for many as a signal that Cesare was lurking behind a conspiracy to replace the Republic's government with his own, most likely led by Piero.⁶

The Florentine forebodings induced alarm. Threats of an uprising against members of the elite classes, or *ottimati*, widely though for the most part wrongly suspected of supporting Cesare and Piero, echoed in the streets. Calls poured forth for the *ottimati* to be arrested and their houses burnt to the ground.

The Signoria issued an emergency request to Louis of France to return with his army, lest he be taken unawares and driven out of Italy altogether. At the same time, Alamanno Salviati and other prominent Signoria members tried to raise money for troops to confront an expected invasion. It was assumed that the Duke's final assault would come after he seized territories close to the poorly defended city itself.

The reports of sexual terror practised by his soldiers, well-known for over a year, contributed strongly to the gathering fear. Much earlier, on 18 May 1501, Landucci had noted in his diary that 'the whole morning we heard of nothing but the iniquities of Valentino's troops; among other things they sacked Carmignano, and carried off all the girls that they found there, who were gathered in a church from all the country round.' Not atypically, a husband was forced to watch as Cesare's troops raped his wife.⁷

The result was that Machiavelli and Soderini's first meeting with Cesare was in no way easy, chatty or pleasant. It was arranged following a hasty trip on horseback and two hours after sunset (or at 'two o'clock at night,' according to the old style of telling the time by the bells rung for church services) on 24 June, in Urbino, at the famous ducal palace that with its magnificent library had long been 'thought by many to be the most beautiful to be found anywhere in all Italy.' Cesare had seized it the day before.⁸

The silvery sixty-year-old Duke of Montefeltro, who together with his brilliant second wife Battista Sforza (she had started her Latin studies at the age of three, and by fourteen, on her betrothal, was stunning audiences with

her orations in Latin as well as her mastery of classical Greek, philosophy and mathematics) had put together one of the finest manuscript libraries in Europe, had by now been dead for over twenty years. His son, Guidobaldo, who as a child had posed with his father for their astonishing double portrait, was in his early thirties. He had become a *condottiere* himself, but had fled the great house with his family after Cesare deceived him into disarming his own city: Cesare had asked for a loan of artillery for a nearby campaign.

Neither Guidobaldo's naïve generosity, nor his loyalty to Cesare's father and the Borgias, nor his last minute pleas, had any effect on Cesare's treachery. In fact as Machiavelli and Francesco Soderini stood with the Borgian leader in the calm candlelit evening at the virtually deserted if well-guarded palace, they might have noticed, had they troubled to look, that his troops had already begun looting the famed library of a good many of its valuable, gem-encrusted, gold-trimmed manuscripts and incunabula.

Cesare's meeting with them had come about at his own request, though the Signoria, thoroughly afraid, was eager to answer his questions about their policy towards him. Their motive remained delay. They hoped that Louis XII might send troops to help them beat back the rebellions around Arezzo, if not to defeat Cesare altogether, at the moment an unrealistic idea. Cesare evinced little patience with his well-dressed and well-mannered guests, and even less with their insistence on Florentine friendship. A fantasy of Republican surrender alone seemed to stimulate his mind, though he apparently hoped that he might manage it by negotiation rather than invasion.

Machiavelli's report on their discussions, which ran on through that evening and into the next, and which he describes in a single long letter, with minute gaps in the writing, or omissions indicating haste, reveals the edginess of the three men, and even an uneasy white heat as he cites Cesare's exact words: 'I don't like this [Florentine] government, and I can't trust it. You [Florentines] must change it and offer guarantees of the observance of what you promise me... . If you don't want me as a friend, you'll find out what it's like to have me as an enemy.'⁹

According to Machiavelli (in the account that he put together and wrote up, but that was signed by Soderini), the Florentines felt perhaps foolishly unimpressed by the aggressive tone of the Captain-General of the papal armies, as his father had designated him. They observed that their 'city had the best government it was able to devise and that, since the city was itself quite satisfied with its government, its friends ought also to be satisfied with it.'¹⁰

Their unbending manner seems to have produced no effect. Cesare simply announced his military aims, or that he would insist on the Signoria's acquiescence, amounting to a complete surrender, along the whole of the Republic's lengthy border with Romagna: 'I desire to have explicit assurances [on this matter] since too well I know that your city is not well-minded toward me, but would abandon me like an assassin, and has already sought to plunge me [into] terrible conflicts with the Pope and King of France.'¹¹ Incredibly, if glibly, he remarked that he planned to demonstrate his good intentions towards Florence by forcing the pig-headed Vitelli into retreating from Arezzo.

So far, at least as indicated by his report, Machiavelli exhibits only a minimal awareness, though he is sensitive enough to Cesare's contempt, that he might be dealing and negotiating with the most significant political leader of the age, or a commander whom he might come to see as emblematic of political and military trends over decades if not centuries to come.

In the competition of the moment, political reflections may have been diverted by their mutual hostility. Nor does Machiavelli show much interest in admitting to Cesare that he might have been more or less right about the Florentine government. Debates were just then in progress over its constitution. Only as a compromise would Piero Soderini be granted the unprecedented honour of being chosen as *Gonfaloniere di giustizia* for life, out of a field of 236 candidates. This would occur on 22 September, amid a mixture of jealousy, envy, a broad if inaccurate sense of yielding to corruption, generally insincere congratulations and, in the face of Cesare's continuing menaces, relief.¹²

Even in these strained circumstances, though, Machiavelli appears to have drawn a number of solid conclusions about his host's character, or enough to announce, albeit frighteningly in reference to a political adventurer several years younger than himself, but who was scarcely a novice: 'This lord styles himself quite splendid and magnificent, and so strong that there seems no enterprise in war so great that to him it will not seem trivial. In adding to his domains and glory he acknowledges neither exhaustion nor danger. He arrives in a new place before people realize that he has set out from an old one. His troops admire him, and he has gathered round him the best men in Italy – all of which facts, plus his perpetual good fortune [*una perpetua fortuna*, a phrase that preserves its ghostly implication of destiny], leave him victorious and formidable.'¹³

To which he might also have added: uncompromising. The first meeting with Cesare having abruptly ended in collisions, the Florentine representatives left to

write up their notes (or to allow Machiavelli to do so), only to be confronted the next day by Cesare's confederates, the Orsini. They too demanded a Florentine capitulation, while dishonestly hinting that Louis of France might switch sides and team up with Cesare.

Beyond one twist lay another. That evening, as Machiavelli and Soderini met Cesare for the second time, they were told that the diplomatic situation had changed. They were now confronted with an ultimatum, though perhaps its rudeness seemed unsurprising in a leader whom Machiavelli had already described as smooth enough to be able to 'install himself in someone else's house before he so much as notices it.'¹⁴ Within four days the Signoria would either accede to his intentions in respect to Florence or, as he intimated, he would deploy his forces, comprising some 25,000 troops, in such ways as he might deem appropriate.

If the danger seemed greater, Cesare's citing a figure of 25,000, while meant to seem impressive, must have seemed a careless or strategic mistake. On enquiring discreetly here and there, Machiavelli had discovered that the *Capitano's* nearest military camps, some three miles off, along with others in Tuscany, held far fewer soldiers than he claimed, or no more than 16,500, including cavalry.¹⁵

This lower number still represented a threat. Certainly it seemed high enough to induce both Florentines, a bit later that evening, to agree that while Soderini ought to stay behind, pursuing such negotiations with the Duke as might still be possible, and perhaps even arranging a delay, Machiavelli ought to return to Florence as fast as he could.

He accordingly set off on horseback early the next morning (26 June), in effect chasing his own dispatched report. The idea was to reach the Signoria with a personal description of Cesare's ultimatum, or in time to give his Florentine colleagues the best opportunity to evaluate their options.

It may have been now that fate, or *Fortuna*, at least in one of the Renaissance senses of the term, put in her oar. *Fortuna* had little to do with luck. Ordinary men and women strapped themselves to the goddess's turning wheel, on which she whipped them mercilessly, and where their circumstances constantly altered between good and evil, because their brains were ruled by irrational passions: this in contrast to saints, who might overcome their passions through prayer and contemplation.

Cesare had already proposed that Florence offer him a *condotta*, or a formal alliance setting him up as a well-paid overseer of the Republic's military affairs,

including its soldiers. His request, which he delivered more or less as a demand, had been rejected.

The swift advance northward of a body of Louis's French troops through the Arno valley towards Arezzo – an intervention of *Fortuna*? – now seemed to blow a good deal of wind out of his sails. Days passed and, puzzled, he insisted on reopening negotiations for the rejected *condotta*. His insistence was received in silence. The Signoria had begun to rejoice in a possible rescue by the French. Recognizing his difficulty, Cesare lapsed into a silence of his own.

Machiavelli almost at once found himself sent off on important missions at mid-to-late-summer intervals, this time in the direction of Arezzo, which he visited twice in August and once in September. His presence was intended to accelerate its French-assisted restoration to Florentine rule. Each of his stays was brief, lasting no more than a day or two – he apparently popped in and out – and may testify less to his negotiating skills than his equestrian stamina. The initial resistance of the French commanders to surrendering their hold on the city, which had more or less fallen into their lap as they marched in, and stubborn problems with Arezzo's citizens over abandoning their rebellion against Florence, required mediation.¹⁶

This Machiavelli was prepared to offer, and with another helpful diplomatic success under his belt he returned to his office in the Palazzo della Signoria, to his friends and his wife, who had just become a young mother: a daughter, Primerana, had been born to them in early summer.

Domesticity seldom held him in check. By early October he was off on another assignment, and again at the shifting headquarters of Cesare Borgia. Its purpose now was to protect Florentine interests in the face of his latest attempts to undermine them, or once more to divert Cesare's ambitions to stage-manage a takeover of the Republic.

These he had never abandoned. In fact he had only just slipped back among his own troops from a secret meeting with the French King in Milan. There he had promised Louis vital military support against the Spanish in his campaign to seize Naples. Cesare's ultimate goal, however, was to drain off the French support of Florence itself. In a sign that all might not be well, or that he might have worries of his own, his trip had not been easy. In travelling back and forth from Urbino to Milan, he had had to sneak in and out of both places, doing so in disguise.

Investigating the Sources of Power

The paradox of Machiavelli's latest assignment to Cesare's headquarters, now relocated to Imola from the picturesque double-peaked mountain of Urbino, was that it came about chiefly because of a decades-in-the-making Florentine constitutional crisis. The crisis had developed out of the contradiction inherent in the workings of almost all democracies and republics. On the one hand, it has to do with most people's suspicion of authority, and on the other, with a need of authority if a government is to function at all.

For decades the Florentine method of dealing with this problem had erred on the side of suspicion. Sour experiences at the hands of Piero de' Medici, and Lorenzo before him, had reinforced a powerful majority in favour of restricting by institutional means all concentrations of power. Extremely close supervision, however, rendered almost impossible the sort of rapid decision-making desirable in a crisis.

In these circumstances, even policy-making became a slippery ideal. A too generous tolerance of personal freedom might also promote military laxness. The Florentine cynicism in respect to authority had exhibited itself in a careful layering of the committees required to elect the Republic's officials, and even more in the brevity of their terms of office. The central purpose of these restraints was to suppress any authoritarian inclination.

At the same time, an insistence on committee control everywhere strengthened a bureaucratic paralysis. An upper level civil servant, such as Machiavelli, found himself forced to stand for election as Second Chancellor once a year. Members of the Signoria were pushed into so many elections for their shorter two-month terms that they scarcely had time to catch their breath. As fast as they came in, they went out, and even when a few achieved an occasional re-election, the chances of frequent or semi-permanent office-holding generally lay beyond their grasp, as did the amassing of practical, extended government experience.

More than other economic or social classes, the *ottimati* had opposed the Florentine system as a quicksand. At first their antagonism had hardly mattered, as proposals to increase the tenure of members of the Signoria to between three and five years failed to win sufficient support in the Grand Council, with its 3,000 disputatious citizens.

An alternative proposal, to create a post of lifetime *Gonfaloniere di giustizia*, was at first rejected, but then, in August 1502, surprisingly found acceptable. The reason was that it had begun to appear enticing to many citizens, if not the *ottimati* themselves, who recognized the need for change but who felt even more worried about the potential power of entire groups of officials offered the boon of lengthy terms. The upshot was that in September Piero Soderini was elected for life.¹

This plum of enhanced political power, if still regarded by many with mistrust, was widely believed to have fallen to the distinguished, honest, if by no means brilliant yet hard worker on the Republic's behalf, a pragmatic, eloquent, educated man, for three reasons. These were his canniness as a negotiator, his assumed secret deals with the *ottimati* and other factions (an idea that turned out to have little basis in fact) and his having remained aloof, or taken no sides, during the violent struggles over Savonarola.

Machiavelli and Piero Soderini now became warm and soon fast friends. As Machiavelli's close relations with his brother Francesco already seemed solid, his career advanced smartly enough.

Piero had himself done a stint as an emissary to Cesare Borgia. This had occurred the year before, and the experience had allowed him to familiarize himself with the Duke's fear-provoking tactics. He now sought out the services of a sympathetic colleague with a background resembling his own.

The new, burly, sensitive standard-bearer of the Republic, as the surviving likenesses show (among them a probable life-mask terracotta bust of the type issued for many local leaders, sold by the dozen and meant for display in private homes), seemed to mellow behind his brooding eyes and his sensitive glance that suggested a personality as passionate about art as politics. From the start, he addressed Machiavelli in his letters not simply as 'Notable man' but 'very dear friend.'

Revealingly, Piero sent him (at Cesare's headquarters) his first brief note to anyone following his election as *Gonfaloniere*. Also revealingly, it had to do with a team of stolen mules:

I ... write to you on behalf of some people from whom six mules were taken during the past months at Castel Durante by some of His Excellency's [Cesare's] men [a mule train carrying goods for two Florentine merchants had been abducted to a castle occupied by Cesare's secretary-treasurer, Alessandro Spannocchi]. ... I would like you to be so kind as to speak in my name to His Most Illustrious Lordship; first of all, you will offer my respects to him; thereafter you will come with His Excellency to the specific case of the six mules that were taken, which it may please him to have returned, for my sake, to ... our carters; you will beseech him for this *over and over again*.²

Soderini's mulish gesture – it looks at first glance merely petulant – seems actually to have been meant to serve as a basis for his conception of firmly grounded diplomacy. It underscored his practical habits. The trivial might offer a clue to those who had to deal with him, or set in place a foundation from which they might sensibly approach more abstract questions and problems.

The new Florentine leader's shrewdness, in other words, was no more to be overestimated than Machiavelli's, and from the start the two worked well as a team. Amid war, treachery and crippling political miscalculations, teamwork counted for a lot, as did Machiavelli's adroitness in resuming his relations with Cesare:

Finding myself not well on horseback at my departure from Florence [he reported back promptly on 7 October] and believing that my commission required all speed, I took the post at Scarperia [*i.e.*, exchanged his slow horses for faster relays] and came here without loss of time, arriving today at about the eleventh hour. Having left my horses and servants behind, I presented myself at once, in my travelling costume, to his Excellency, who received me most graciously.³

In the face of mounting threats, no time was to be lost by the now seasoned official: even a change of clothes might be ignored at the risk of appearing a mass of wrinkles, or washing up after a sweaty ride. More than ever, the hours leaked their plots, rumours and gossip.

From the start, therefore, he made every effort to ingratiate himself with Cesare, and perhaps most felicitously by disclosing what he knew about those conspiring to destroy him: 'I [right away] ... spoke of the defection of the [powerful] Orsini [family], of their meeting with their adherents [or those most committed among the several known plotters], how they had cunningly endeavored to induce your Lordships [the Signoria] to unite with all of them,'

or to join in fomenting an uprising to cripple the Duke's military ambitions throughout central Italy, and perhaps even provoke his assassination.⁴

At the moment there seemed little doubt that a major conspiracy had been developing for weeks among the leaders of the major military families and some of Cesare's trusted aides, *condottieri* and civil confederates. Machiavelli thus assumed that improved relations might be achieved by feigning if not feeling some concern for his welfare.

Over a glass or two of the sour local wine and chunks of the coarse local bread – each reputed to possess qualities beneficial to the exhausted traveller – he seated himself in the receiving room of the quadrangular fortress built for her protection by the recently imprisoned Caterina Sforza. With its fifteen-foot-thick walls and forty-foot-deep moat, the castle provided a solid defence against the latest artillery, or an optimal place for informing Cesare of the Signoria's having rejected the invitations of two of the three Orsini brothers and other conspirators. Among them was the embittered Vitellozzo Vitelli; Cesare described Vitellozzo as having 'thrown himself at his feet, weeping,' begging him to invade Florence. All had urged the unwilling Florentines to join in luring him into a battlefield disaster.⁵

Despite its sincerity, Machiavelli's gambit seems to have made only a superficial impression. Equipped with spies of his own, Cesare was already apprised of the plot. He had a list of those involved: Giampaolo Baglioni (known as 'the tyrant of Perugia'), Antonio da Venafro (a roving emissary of Pandolfo Petrucci, ruler of Siena), Oliverotto da Fermo, Vitelli himself and Cardinal Giambattista Orsini, now living in Rome, along with his brothers, Paolo and Francesco.

Probably as a result, the Duke allowed himself a mere nod and a trace of frowning dismissiveness, casually pledging his gratitude and devotion to the Signoria and the Florentine people. Machiavelli nonetheless imagined that his time had not been wasted, or that their hasty meeting, intended to reintroduce him to the Duke's court, was not without its value. This was because a pattern of mutual reassurance had been established which might prove useful. Having gained a measure of Cesare's trust, or as much of it as in his chary lifetime he allotted to anyone except his beautiful, well-read and perhaps incestuous sister Lucrezia, Machiavelli might even expect to become the beneficiary of one of the Duke's subtler quirks. It appeared at odd moments – but might it not simply be the eccentricity of the expert liar? – his almost desperate need, and especially on occasions demanding secrecy, to exchange confidences.

Cesare had acted in a quite similar way a few months earlier, in July and August, if with someone better known, Machiavelli's neighbour, Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo's Florentine studio was located a few streets over from the Machiavelli *palazzo*. It is uncertain whether the Second Chancellor got to know the fifty-year-old artist-inventor before his arrival in Imola. It seems likely that they had known each other, however, and even that Machiavelli and Piero Soderini were instrumental in promoting Leonardo's abilities with the Duke as a military engineer and architect, or as capable and versatile enough to assist him in his ideas of territorial expansion.⁶

No doubt for the sake of hagiography, Leonardo is even today often admired as placid, soft-bearded, spiritual and oracular, when at fifty he was bristly, bustling with plans and self-promotional. The serenity of the sage had not yet replaced the brashness of the autodidact.

In the autumn of 1502, Leonardo found himself at Imola, and not simply at the same moment as Machiavelli but also as the Duke's prized guest. In a small town overflowing with slapdash, hired soldiers, the artist had been ordered to make elaborate sketches of the layout of Caterina's fortress, taking measurements of its lofty walls, moat, parapets, corridors and windows, and amassing the mathematical and military data essential to his new responsibilities as Cesare's military engineer.

His presence there had segued out of a tour during the summer just past, also paid for by Cesare, which led him into the fertile nearby provinces and included trips to Urbino, Pesara, Rimini and Cesena. As he moved about, he made notes not only on architectural issues pertinent to his professional curiosity but also on his reactions to the fussier habits of the peasantry, such as their preference for carts with absurdly small front wheels, which rendered them hard to push and apt when loaded to fall apart or tip over.

At Pavia in August, Cesare had recognized his gifts by granting an unlimited passport-licence to 'our most excellent and well-beloved architect and general engineer Leonardo Vinci, who by our commission is to survey the places and fortresses of our states.'⁷ Leonardo was rapidly put to military uses. Accompanying Cesare in early October into a swampy battle at Fossombrone, he had improvised a wooden bridge, enabling the Duke's army to cross a river and suppress a rebellion. Elsewhere, Leonardo examined tower defences and proposed improvements. He investigated optimal artillery and mortar positions, military escape routes, harbours, assembly points for soldiers and the soft spots of castles. He drafted a map of Imola and modified old maps of the

Valdichiana to indicate prominent landscape contours, which remain accurate to this day. He displayed over them the valley's extensive, intricate waterways with precision, creating an atlas of its lakes, ponds, streams and rivers.⁸

Much of his cartographical work he clarified in contrasting colours. It is not known whether he and Machiavelli discussed while at Imola the perennial Florentine challenge of defeating Pisa, or turned their attention to a daring scheme to cut the city off from the sea and leave it open to a land invasion by diverting the Arno. In his reports to the Signoria, Machiavelli makes no mention of Leonardo or the plan, and it seems plausible that had he done so, given the chance that his reports might have been read by Cesare's censors, he could have run some risk to his safety. Within months, however, the plan was to appeal to both men, and it may then have been discussed.

As on earlier missions, Machiavelli's reports rolled out in waves, if with a frequency and length that indicated his absorption in the commercial, diplomatic, amorous, military and secret comings and goings at what had become Cesare's headquarters. They overflowed with descriptions of his ability to bob and weave, to throw his enemies off guard, to assuage blind hatred, to mollify critics with lies and ultimately to commit ferocious acts of treachery while persuading his victims of his undying respect.

From another point of view, Machiavelli's reports, some of which are a few thousand words long, should also be understood as only-to-be-expected expressions of his efficiency. On 20, 22, 26, 28 and 29 November, not to mention 6 and 18 December, he wrote and dispatched by courier more than seven voluminous, information-packed communiqués.⁹ Most were written during long stints stretching late into the night. When else at Cesare's nerve-centre of military planning, or his crossroads for repairing and distributing weapons (including new armour and shields), training exercises and negotiations, could the Ten of War's Secretary have found the time?

Often his crammed pages reflect an anxiety about the Republic ('on taking my leave of his Excellency he reminded me again to recall to your Lordships that if you remained undecided you would certainly lose, while by uniting with him you might be victorious'¹⁰), and the odd flicker of danger ('we see all his enemies armed and ready at any moment to light a general conflagration'¹¹).

Several reports focus on Cesare's efforts to increase his always inadequate, often declining number of troops. A couple allude to his practice, still fairly radical in those days, of recruiting entire regiments of soldiers from Romagna

and others of the conquered territories, rather than continuing to rely exclusively on mercenaries: 'Five days ago he mustered six thousand infantry into his own service from his own states, and which he can have together in two days.'¹²

Though ease of recruitment retained a perpetual attraction, Cesare's purpose was not so much to enlarge his army, always in search of untested, ready troops, as to gain the edge granted by the loyalty of soldiers convinced that they were fighting for house and home as well as profit (which for the ordinary soldier remained mostly a delusion): 'As to men-at-arms and light cavalry, he has caused it to be published that he will take into his pay all ... as are within his own states, and they are at once to report themselves to him.'¹³

For Cesare – or, to cite a similar European example of some centuries later, Napoleon, and especially as the French Emperor advanced east across Europe into Russia, with his progress following the enactment of the world's first national conscription laws – the push into a peninsula-long Italian victory would most smoothly come about through a new military equation. This would combine superior strategic abilities with those of native-born soldiers and their interest in self-defence, plus lightning-fast shifts between attacks, retreats, counter-attacks and ambushes. The whole package might best come wrapped in the deliberately terrifying and treacherous.

Retribution and Dominance

At the same time, Machiavelli was hardly proving a reliable husband. ‘Madonna Marietta wrote me via her brother,’ scribbled his friend Biagio Buonaccorsi in red-faced haste just after his arrival at Imola in October, ‘asking when you will be back.’

As far as Marietta was concerned, as a result of her husband’s demanding diplomatic activities, once he had left home and Florence he seemed simply to vanish. At first she was astonished, and then became stubborn and angry:

‘She says she does not want to write, and she is making a big fuss, and she is hurt because you had promised her you would stay eight days and no more. So come back, in the name of the devil, so the womb [or their sex life, though Biagio’s remark is meant in jest rather than earnest] doesn’t suffer.’¹

The devil lay in the details of his sense of urgency. His diplomatic work might have allayed it, but it would no more be quashed by wifely remonstrances than sluggish horses, or even complaints about a stylish black cloak that he wanted to buy and that he had ordered sent out to him over Marietta’s objections. ‘Madonna Marietta has learned of this mantle [that you’ve ordered through me] and is [once more] making a big fuss,’ wrote Biagio on 21 October. Just before Machiavelli’s departure, her annoyance was soothed by his arranging the marriage of one of her servants, and doing it ‘well,’ though she still wanted information about the woman’s dowry, which he seems to have paid.

His cloak, on the other hand, with its new hat to match, he asked to be made up in a plush black damask – expense was no object – or decently enough to flatter him as a representative of the Signoria, though he was no ambassador. One Lorenzo, the merchant providing the material, was afraid to approach Marietta for payment and entered it into a private account of Machiavelli’s: ‘I do not know whether I shall have [your new] mantle this evening,’ noted Biagio. ‘If

I do, I shall send it; if not, I shall not fail to by the first messenger... . Be patient, since I have to be.²² In the meantime, and perhaps irked, Marietta went to stay for a few days at the house of her brother-in-law, Piero del Neri.

These petty-seeming issues of clothing and marital neglect are probably easier to understand in the light of the constant threats of conspiracy and invasion, not to mention the political unease, despite Soderini's election as *Gonfaloniere*. In Florence spats also erupted more often than usual over the meagre salaries of many in government. As during his first year in office, Machiavelli's remained fixed at 128 gold florins. For months, the military quagmire mesmerized the population. Might the French King not change his mind and cut off assistance to the Republic? Landucci reports that, as early as June, five of the city's tall gates, the San Giorgio, San Miniato, la Giustizia, Pinti and Porticciola al Prato, were ordered shut against incursions which might be tried by night and hostile 'people and [subversive] letters [that might be] brought in' by day. Homeowners along the Arno were warned not to leave ladders in the water. Borgo had rebelled, and Anghiari surrendered, to Cesare's satisfaction.

Florence itself began to look dishevelled, or 'wounded to death,' as Landucci describes it, and a target of popular ridicule. Two hundred troops were mustered by the Signoria, a bare minimum. Morale-boosting sermons in their support could be heard daily in the pulpits of the churches. Graffiti of hanged men and waiting gallows – sneers of contempt – were smeared on the outer walls of the houses of government employees and officials, among them that of Soderini. The malaise lifted a little on the politically historic Tuesday (1 November) when 'Soderini, [now officially proclaimed] *Gonfaloniere* for life, entered the *Palagio* with [a] new *Signoria*. All Florence was in the Piazza, as this was a new thing never done before in our city. Everyone seemed to have hopes of living in comfort.'²³

Perversely, the best hopes of Florentine comfort, at least for the present, depended on Cesare defeating the plots directed at him. His own idea of peace, or a thug's peace, might be peace as well. At Soderini's prodding, therefore, and because he needed the most reliable information on Cesare as rapidly as possible, Machiavelli extended his stay in Imola through November into December, if in a half-hearted manner. His enthusiasm subsided further as he fell ill. In late November he wrote that he was running a 'violent fever.'²⁴ In early December he added that if the illness persisted he might be brought home 'in a

box.⁵ His enigmatic illness may have been more ploy than reality. He recovered quickly enough: all references to illness are omitted from his subsequent letters.

As on his previous mission to Cesare, he may have concluded that keeping tabs on the Duke's unpredictable tacking about had lost any practical value. A Florentine official might better be employed in Florence (on 14 December he remarked, 'My remaining here is of no further use'⁶). His sense of futility seems emphasized by the sheer whimsy of his personal letters during those autumn months. Bartolomeo Ruffini, a friend and co-worker at the Chancellery, describes them as 'most welcome ... and the jokes and witticisms you write ... make everyone split [their] sides laughing and give great pleasure.'⁷

Praise for his official reports continued to pour in, accompanied by requests that he make them longer. His gift of conjuring up a convincing atmosphere through details, of letting his readers feel present at Cesare's thrust-and-parry encampment as he trained his troops and issued his barrages of orders, struck Machiavelli's employers as vital to grasping their own predicament.

In describing Cesare's enemies, the Orsini, who succeeded only ineptly in concealing their motives, Machiavelli had noted that the Duke termed them a 'gang of bankrupts,' arguing in his defence that 'the reason ... they had no wish to declare themselves openly against me was that they were raking in my cash.' As long as his father the Pope and the French King supported him, he jeered, only a 'fool' would risk opposing him. His allies 'had kindled so great a fire in his favour that all the water the Orsini might command could not quench it.'⁸

Yet at just that moment, or during the last weeks of autumn, as Machiavelli realized, and after biding his time, Cesare came up with a plan to eliminate the conspiracy altogether. This was to reach beyond the immediate threat to his success. It would rid him of the malign neighbours and false friends who had, by his lights and when push came to shove, revealed themselves as agents of 'treachery.' As he ordered Machiavelli to inform the Signoria: 'I have no lack of true friends [the French King and his father], amongst whom I would be glad to count your Signori, providing they promptly let me understand as much. If they do not, I shall ignore them to the extent that even if I find myself in water up to my throat I will never again allude to any friendship between us, though I might always regret having a neighbour to whom I could not render any friendly service, or receive any from him.'⁹

Disarmingly in its early phases, his plan consisted of a generous enough gesture, or an invitation to his enemies to set aside their differences for the sake of

harmony, conquest and money. It seemed an offer too good to be refused. At any rate, their refusal might easily run the risk, or so the conspirators assumed, of provoking him into dangerous retaliations. In retrospect, their suspicions seem to have been unrealistic, though they offer lingering testimony to Cesare's charisma. By late September 1502, not only was he in command of far weaker forces than they knew, but their own situation had substantially improved.

After seizing Urbino and reinstalling Guidobaldo, Duke of Montefeltro, as its ruler, they had concentrated their efforts on occupying nearby villages. Their victories sounded alarm bells in Cesare's mind, but he managed to forestall any damage with his offer of peace. Those defying him, he said, could simply keep what they had taken. He insisted on ruling in name only. With this concession, he enticed into carelessness those eager to see him destroyed. By early October Paolo Orsini had been assigned to meet him in negotiations intended to end all hostilities.

From the start, though, and deliberately on Cesare's part, these negotiations, or what turned into tedious disputes, bogged down among wheedling, dithering over boundaries, complicated treaty-clauses and problems of administration. At the same time, in Imola and others of his encampments, as Machiavelli noticed and informed the Signoria, there began to pour in a hefty stream of French lancers – some 400, accompanied by yeoman-aides, or about 2,500 men altogether – along with hundreds of troops (Cesare had been allocated money by his father to pay them, and within weeks accepted 'six loads of silver coin from the French King' to pay the lancers¹⁰).

To everyone's confusion, his offers of peace seemed to mark the start of preparations for war. On 20 November, influenced by a perhaps naïve trust in Cesare's good faith, Machiavelli reported that 'no one knows what to make of the warlike preparations of the Duke in the midst of all these peace negotiations,' conceding that 'companies of infantry are also returning here ... [even if] it is not believed that [Cesare] will fail of his word where he has once given it.'¹¹

Two days later, though, Machiavelli found his trust slipping a bit: 'I think I know his character pretty well,' he assured the Signoria, remarking that he found it senseless 'to exasperate rather than to soothe' the Duke with questions concerning his motives: it would be better to 'wait until I am spoken to in relation to these matters... I do not know whether it will be easy for me to obtain [a new audience with him], for he lives only to advance his own interests, or what seem to him such, and without placing confidence in anyone else.'¹²

Despite these mystifications, everyone expected that Cesare and his army would rapidly move out of Imola. He intimated as much, acknowledging that relocating his forces was essential to quelling the anxieties about his plans. The army's departure came quietly, however, on the morning of 10 December, amid a smothered clattering of wagons, boots, carts, mules, baggage and horses. The units moved at a leisurely pace, undulating in a snowstorm along the road toward Forlì.

Machiavelli planned to follow the next day, though he had just seven ducats in his pocket. These would soon be gone, and he would have to petition the Duke and his officers for food and a place to stay, and even a blanket against the cold, at least until the Signoria sent him money in an appropriation that they were proving slow to make. The consequence of his immediate poverty was that when the not entirely unexpected bloodbath started, or about two weeks later, Machiavelli found himself in the company of Cesare's troops, though his presence hardly signified an enthusiastic acceptance of what they were about.

By 14 December, writing from Cesena, the effective capital of Cesare's state of Romagna ('I myself, who heard him, and noted his very words and the terms which his Excellency employed, ... and observed the gesticulations with which he accompanied them, can scarcely believe it'), he was troubled by the Duke's establishing his latest military base in overwhelming numbers along the town's main streets.

On 23 December, also writing from Cesena, Machiavelli noted in a letter that went astray, but for which he wrote a replacement, that Ramiro Lorqua, Cesare's governor in the Romagna since 1500, a sly, lumbering *condottiere* dreaded by everyone for the torture-driven methods by which he shored up the Duke's power, but who had himself been exposed as part of the conspiracy, had been arrested and 'confined at the bottom of the tower': 'It is feared that he will be sacrificed to the populace, who are eager that he should be.'¹³

Expressions of joy at Ramiro's arrest formed an overture to his execution a few hours later. Even his manner of dying held terrible implications: '[The governor] was found [at dawn] today cut into two pieces in the public square, and his body still remains there, so that the whole population has been able to see it. The [reason for] his death is not precisely known, other than that it was the pleasure of his Excellency thus to show that he has the power to make and unmake men at his will, and according to their merits.'¹⁴

As many sensed, with the evidence of Cesare's power left on public display,

a new policy of repression, involving a gorier handling of Cesena than under Ramiro, had been set in motion. Through calculated acts of terror, Cesare seemed to be expunging all hints of dissent from his increasingly absolutist rule.

The sacking of Senigallia, a small port city on the Adriatic at the mouth of the Misa, which had been sacked by Pompey in 82 BCE and by Alaric in 408, came next on his agenda. Here, as in other towns, the conspirators had gathered to greet him to celebrate their just-arranged peace. Their own arrest, however, and the disarming, killing or absorption into his army of their soldiers, a price extracted in a vicious surprise attack that soaked the urban snow for over ten hours – sackings required hard work, along with arson, rape and murder – were witnessed by Machiavelli, though he was not present at the executions. A few of the conspirators guessed what might be in store. They decided to meet Cesare anyway, though, as if placing their heads in the lion's mouth.

In an incontestably religious world, consecrated as ever to an inculcation of ancient guilt and spiritual, religious concepts of personal worthlessness, treachery remained the basest and most self-contradictory of criminal acts. It exceeded even the shabby acts of kidnapping and assassination, with its primary disgraced exemplar the deformed though once heavenly seraph Lucifer. His banishment from heaven into the nethermost, icy, boggy region of Dante's Hell, had never been completely forgotten, even by the indifferently religious.

Knowledge of one's own acts of betrayal, or one's treacherous, oath-breaking guilt in respect to deeds buried in the past, or the treasonous behaviour of one's family and associates, exercised a merciless hypnosis. Many judges might be guilty of equally hideous crimes. A corrupt death sentence often retained its whispers of redemption.

Vitellozzo bade an eerie farewell to his soldiers that morning, riding out to greet Cesare in the snowy brightness on his peace-implying mule, unarmed, polite, even doffing his hat. Cesare had decided to meet him *en route* from Fano to Senigallia. He had divided his troops, concealing half of them a few leagues off to avoid any hint of an ambush. Along with the Orsini brothers and their soldiers, but buoyed by his assumption of the Duke's standard, Vitellozzo had already laid claim to Senigallia as a prospective gift. Cesare seemed ready to receive it with his always charming expressions of gratitude.

The Orsini had assisted Vitellozzo when he claimed Senigallia. Along with their allies and Oliverotto da Fermo, but only after, at Cesare's request, stationing their troops outside the city walls, he joined the two commanders. The schedule called for them to enter the city together, although Oliverotto, a *condottiere* whose suspicions had become implacable, had to be prodded before he consented to ride with them at all. This dispute continued into the morning of 31 December as all five soldiers proceeded to an elegant town-house set aside for their celebratory feast. Traces of Cesare's innocent-seeming smiles attended their hopeful glances on the wintry air.

The city itself looked white and brimming with expectation, the weather, as can be deduced from Machiavelli's reports and his subsequent description, cold but agreeable. He had not yet, it seems, received an encouraging letter of 23 December from Alamanno Salviati, expressing certainty of a positive outcome for him of his approaching annual election as Second Chancellor ('I do not believe that your being absent is going to reduce your chances for reconfirmation, especially since your activities are well known, and are of such a nature that you are the one to be begged, rather than begging others; all the more [so] since you are abroad on public business').¹⁵

Like many letters, Salviati's was probably delayed as Machiavelli moved from town to town. For the same reason he seems also not to have heard about Marietta's most recent outburst, alluded to in a letter written by Biagio on 21 December. She no longer felt as miserable over his ignoring her as being cheated. After more than a year as his wife, she had still not received the dowry promised at their wedding: 'Madonna Marietta is cursing God, and ... feels she has thrown away ... her body and her possessions. For your own sake, arrange for her to have her dowry like other women, otherwise we won't hear the end of it.'¹⁶

That morning, though, along with the eyes and ears of Senigallia, Machiavelli's attention was fixed on Cesare and his fellow *condottieri*'s arrival in the icy streets, and then on the squad of soldiers surrounding the small group of men. Like Vitellozzo, they had defied the Duke's leadership and now rode beside him in what seemed a civilized reconciliation.

Machiavelli was apparently as enthralled as they by the silky tableau, and so as shocked by what next occurred without warning: '[As] soon as [Cesare] had entered the place with them at his side, he suddenly turned to his guard and ordered them to seize these men; and having thus made them all prisoners, the place was given up to pillage.'¹⁷

Astonishment plunging into fright, and then into a flourishing of swords, axes and daggers, followed by ghostly crunchings with the slaughter of the troops waiting at the gate, and a wholesale slaughter bunching into the murder of the citizen-witnesses just inside the gate, and then the murder of those in the houses close by as the neighbourhood more or less blossomed with arquebuses and lances unleashing violence – maimings, shootings, choppings, gushings, pitched against a crackling of armour, horses falling, the crisp snapping of bones: ‘It is now the twenty-third hour, and the greatest turmoil prevails, so that I really do not know whether I shall be able to dispatch this letter, having no one whom I can send. I shall write more fully in my next, but according to my judgement the prisoners will not be alive tomorrow.’¹⁸

Most were not, though for days afterwards Cesare held off killing them all. With the capture of two of the Orsini brothers and Vitellozzo, and after their soldiers had been seized, with many killed as they surrendered, or in some instances, often among soldiers posted to nearby castles, drawn into bloody skirmishes in which they were killed after agreeing to surrender, broadsides flooded the streets, proclaiming that ‘the Traitors are captured,’ intended to stir up sympathy for Cesare.

Machiavelli’s report on the betrayal, written up after his more detailed account again failed to get through, also makes it clear that the conspirators’ arrest took place not at the city gate, as he at first surmised amid the panicked jumble of men, mules and horses, but inside the ‘*appartamento*,’ or the house reserved for their feast. There Vitellozzo tried uselessly to defend himself with a knife while Cesare’s plan went off like clockwork: ‘At two o’clock in the night [a couple of hours after sunset] [Cesare] had me [summoned] and with the most serene air in the world expressed to me his delight in his success.’¹⁹

By then Vitellozzo and Oliverotto had been strangled, though Cesare continued to hold prisoner two of the three Orsini brothers. His plan was to eliminate them only after his papal father in Rome had let the third brother, Cardinal Giambattista, learn of the sack at Senigallia. At that point the most influential and potentially most dangerous of the three might be expected to ride to the Vatican to offer Alexander spurious, fearful congratulations on his son’s victory. Giambattista could then (as happened) be arrested and locked up at the Castel Sant’Angelo, also according to plan, where, as it turned out, he would be left to die in the dark after a few more days, a likely victim of poisoning.

Only afterwards, or with the elimination of the Orsini as a threat, and certain of a complete round-up of the rest of the conspirators, did Cesare plan to go ahead with the executions, also by strangulation, of the brothers now in his custody (as occurred on 18 January).

Even now, though, he understood that his reputation must be growing by leaps and bounds. Notoriety would be developing into fame, fame into legend. Even if the legend seemed tarnished, still it would shine darkly: the dingiest historical fable might be expected to exercise a useful influence. Over the next few weeks, as he guessed, the ingenuity with which he had seduced and eliminated his enemies would be granted its gossip-embellished admiration in Florence and elsewhere, or among tens of thousands of citizens from Venice to Milan to Rome. Superior cunning at the princely level could always be counted on to assume some sheen for its efficiency, much like the professional staging of a play. The model of the successful ruler was always the gifted actor.

As a result, in the heady aftermath of the first executions and amid the triumphant lights gathering about the ravishing of Senigallia, he could risk preening himself before Machiavelli, larding his skill with self-righteous praise and in the end proffering the *coup de grâce* announcement that his true purpose in destroying the conspiracy had been unselfish. Throughout, he avowed, he had attempted only to ensure the well-being of Florence, to remove ‘the chief enemies of the King of France, of himself and the Florentine Republic, ... [and so eliminate the] seeds of trouble and dissension calculated to ruin Italy, for which [as Machiavelli reported] your Lordships [the Signoria] ought to be under great obligations to him.’²⁰

An apparent quest of revenge, Cesare remarked, had only masked his devotion to fostering a climate of political and military improvement. Republican freedoms had concerned him rather than ratcheting up victories. He ought therefore to be congratulated, and seen less as conqueror than liberator, or at least as a reluctant warrior. Unmentioned if inescapable amid these declarations, lay the suggestion, noted by Machiavelli and later the Signoria, that his success could also be construed as assisting him in finally achieving his long-sought goal of dominating if not conquering Florence.

In the meantime, and also during those chancy hours, the plight of hundreds trapped in the ruins of Senigallia, among them his own soldiers, slipped from the sickly into the desperate into the deathly desperate. Flames, mangled limbs, broken furniture, torn-up streets, smashed glass, along with crowds of the

dying, suffering and wounded, with many huddling amid the freezing winter winds and rains, left Machiavelli breathless: ‘You would not believe it were I to describe the condition of the army and its followers; [any] man [able to] sleep under [any] cover [at all] is deemed fortunate.’²¹

Plans to Change the Arno

Peering through the semi-wreckage of Senigallia, early 1503 (though the new year was celebrated on 25 March) showed Cesare consolidating his achievements. January added to the districts succumbing to his charisma, as a string of Umbrian towns, among them Gualdo to the east, and the Etruscan-built city of Perugia to the west and west of the Tiber, mounted on its famous, pregnant hill, surrendered at his bidding, or without a struggle. In some towns frightened, dazed citizens flooded the streets, shouting ‘Cesare, Cesare!’ and ‘*Duca, duca!*’ The end of the conspiracy had come to mean more than the collapse of resistance to his rule, even if it released waves of terror, rebellions against civil order and contagious criminality.

Machiavelli watched a familiar loosening and falling away of social restraints with estranged helplessness: ‘Your Lordships ... will excuse the delay if my letters are behind time. For the peasants conceal themselves; no soldier is willing to absent himself, not wanting to forego his chances of plunder; and my own domestics are unwilling to separate themselves from me for fear of being robbed.’¹

By now the mob of disorderly, shunned soldier-supporters of the Orsini and Vitellozzo, on the prowl for loot and safety, had begun to bash and brawl their way towards Siena. Spreading into the inhabited valleys and glens, they terrorized the countryside. Peasants hid in the many abandoned houses, and at Siena itself, virtual centre of the conspiracy, but still controlled by Pandolfo Petrucci, who seemed intimidated, the riotous soldiers met with a chilly embrace. Other towns and villages fought them to a standstill. At Torciano and Assisi they were routed, at Chiusi turned away.

Cesare’s army behaved no better – in fact much worse. At Santa Quirica, which his soldiers seized after strolling into Pienza and Sarteano, the population fled, leaving behind dead horses, cattle rotting in the streets and nine old women and two old men. The soldiers strung the women up by their arms, lit

fires under their feet and tortured them for money. None had any, but they were left to die in the flames. The soldiers then ransacked the town, stealing what they could, cracked open casks of wine, which they spilled in the street, and set the houses on fire. In Acquapendente, Montefiascone and Viterbo, they raped the women and razed the houses.²

On 8 January in Assisi, Machiavelli, still following the Duke's army, finally found a place to stay, paying for it with money sent him by the Signoria, which had at last arrived. As early as the sixth, however, when entering Gualdo amid Cesare's soldiers, he realized that he had changed his mind about the apparently invincible young commander, or that it might be appropriate to register a less contemptuous view of what was becoming his unstoppable string of victories: 'People here wonder that you [the Signoria] have not written, or in some way sent your congratulations to him upon what he has lately done for your advantage; for he is persuaded that our whole Republic should feel under great obligations to him. He says that the killing of Vitellozzo and the destruction of the Orsinis' power would have cost you 200,000 ducats [had you tried to organize their defeat on your own], and, moreover, that you would never have [managed it as smoothly] yourselves as ... [has been] done by him.'³

Entering Assisi, south of Perugia, where the medieval houses and streets still seemed to kneel before their majestic castle perched on its swaggering mountain, or moving forward on the momentum of Cesare's troops, who had begun stepping out in a swagger of their own, Machiavelli may have surprised himself by launching into an appreciation of Cesare's success. He went too far, it was thought back in Florence, lauding his 'unheard of good fortune, with [his] courage and [a] confidence almost superhuman, ... [he believes] himself capable of accomplishing whatever he undertakes.'⁴

To Machiavelli it seemed that Fortune's wheel had turned, or that the political weather had shifted. A new wind was blowing down the valleys. A cruel if intelligent sun had risen. It might bestow harmonious, militarized beams throughout the peninsula. Everyone, including members of the Signoria, could do worse than take stock of its apparent glory.

This conviction did not last, as would probably have been unlikely, and one reason lay in Cesare's modest military strength. His army at this point consisted of 'five hundred men at arms, eight hundred light cavalry and about six thousand infantry.' It thus formed a scarcely unchallengeable force, though it might be taken more seriously if supplemented by the *condottiere* messer

Giovanni Bentivogli's generosity to the tune of an additional hundred men at arms and two hundred light cavalry. These Bentivogli felt 'bound to furnish,' even if tossing them into the mix still left Cesare too weak to seize Siena, at the moment under the protection of the French, whose ally, the *condottiere* Pandolfo, had fled in fear of his life.

With one eye as always on the main chance, Cesare now decided to test Pandolfo's gullibility by luring him into a trap. This time, however, his usual scheming, lubricated by flattery, failed to entice his quarry from an escape hole and went badly wrong. The soldiers springing the trap were blocked by a wary Florentine commander, and Cesare forced both to abandon his attempt and the risk of trying to seize Siena.

In terms of Machiavelli's estimate of him, however, his change in plans seems to have made no difference. An almost supernatural aura surrounded Cesare's accomplishments. It would not easily be dissipated, and especially not in the atmosphere of military romance gathering about his leadership and hallowing the fantasies of friends and foes alike. Colourful descriptions of his exploits, ruses, betrayals and victories began to decorate his reputation. Over time they would enhance a new Christian-oriented history.

It was to unfold among the latest epic poems, such as Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532), and many of the adventure stories, love lyrics and heroic novels of France, England, Italy, Spain and Germany, and by such as Dumas *père et fils*, Friedrich Schiller and Walter Scott. A sanguinary culture of derring-do had been born. It was laced with dash, ruthlessness and a heady dose of grandeur. A fair-minded observer might even have concluded with Machiavelli that a few raw circumstances, or some twist of Fortune's wheel, which neither slowed nor stopped, and which had now permitted a few shadows to fall across Cesare's frustration with a single enemy, was of little consequence. Flickers of opposition seemed only to intensify the brilliance of his destiny.⁵

Its brilliance helped to shift Machiavelli's focus over the coming months, as with Cesare's it settled on Rome, and for other reasons too, as his attention also returned to Pisa and Leonardo and the scheme for diverting the Arno. As always, questions about the Republic's safety seemed more stimulating than the challenges of family life, though the spring of the following year found Marietta pregnant with their second child.

For decades, the military edge to be gained by diverting Florence's commercially essential river had seemed self-evident. A new channel to the

Mediterranean would deprive the Pisans of any opportunity to interfere with Florentine exports. Pisa itself might be left high and dry. The Republic's appeal to the French and other allies could be enhanced. Republican independence thus rested to some extent either on retaking the port city, or, should doing so prove too difficult, dodging around it. Given a few innovative engineering techniques, including an as yet unbuilt massive digging machine, a dodge seemed feasible. Were it handled by Leonardo, regarded by many as the most imaginative among the available engineers, a diversionary channel might tip the scales towards winning the Pisan war.

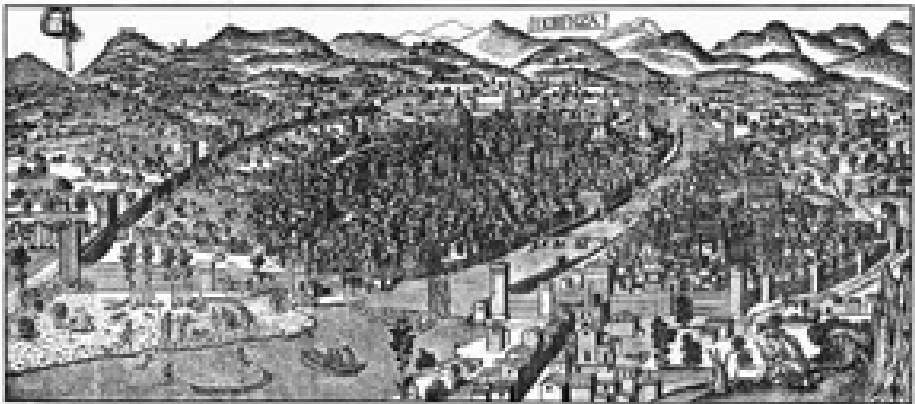
By 23 January, and perhaps wearing his expensive new cloak and hat against the cold, Machiavelli found himself back in Florence after his months-long stay at Cesare's court and among his troops. Here he realized that the question of financing a project as bold as redirecting the river – never mind the more pressing need to recruit a Republican army capable of defying Cesare – was becoming increasingly dubious. Vehement debates stormed back and forth between citizen-members of governmental committees over whether to levy a new war tax, whether to tax the *ottimati* more than everyone else and whether local priests and the rest of the Florentine clergy ought also to be taxed, with the additional revenue slotted into payments for an expanded army. Support for the clerical tax would have required the consent of the Pope and seemed a direct slap in the face of his son Cesare. It led Soderini for the first time into becoming the target of insults.⁶

Machiavelli inserted himself into these quarrels on his friend's behalf, mostly in favour of his proposal for the war tax, defending it in a shrewd political analysis that he wrote up as a speech. It may have been delivered by Soderini, or some other sympathetic colleague, and even before the Grand Council. What is striking is its impatient tone, or a linking of logic, politics, history, journalistic conciseness and a half-disguised aggressiveness, all of which suggest that, though undated, he would have written it now rather than months or a decade later, as a few have suggested. Packed with intimate references to the military conflicts over the past few years, mostly at Arezzo, and despite his calling it mere 'rhetoric,' it stresses the urgency of the moment, and his audience's understandable angst.

Under the title 'Words [or *Concione*, a belittling term, with humorous hints of bombast] to be spoken on the Law for Appropriating Money, After Giving a little Introduction and Excuse,' he starts off with a sweeping statement framed



I. Santi di Tito (1536–1603): Portrait of Machiavelli (author's photo)



II. Florence c.1480–90 (author's photo collection)



III. Inside image (1896; neg. 19122) of a room in the Machiavelli palazzo (©V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London)



IV. Duke Federico da Montefeltro and his Son Guido (Bridgeman Art Library)



V. The Execution of Savonarola (Bridgeman Art Library)



VI. Portrait of Piero Soderini (Scala/Art Resource NY)



VII. Portrait of Caterina Sforza
(Scala/Art Resource NY)



VIII. Portrait of Cesare Borgia
(Bridgeman Art Library)



IX. After Leonardo da Vinci (Peter Paul Rubens):
The Battle of Anghiari (Bridgeman Art Library)



X. After Michelangelo (Aristotile da Sangallo): The Battle of Cascina, or Soldiers
Bathing (©Collection of the Earl of Leicester; Bridgeman Art Library)



XI. Albrecht Dürer: The Emperor Maximilian (author's photo)



XII. Sant'Andrea in Percussina (author's photo)

228.
De fidei et caritatis...
...fuerunt...

Caro mio figlio Guido...
...della tua salute...

XIII. Letter of Machiavelli to his son Guido (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Firenze; lettera autografa, no.53, vol. 1) (See pp.288-9.)

as an historical principle. 'Force and prudence,' he announces, echoing his humanist education, '[create] the might of all the governments that ever have been or will be in the world.'⁷ His key phrase is 'ever have been.' It pegs an understanding of the sources of military and political power to the past as teacher of the present. His premise thus implies the worthlessness of any argument about modern problems that is unsupported by historical knowledge. By insinuating that history is an ingredient of all knowledge, he also implies that it may be the most significant source of thinking.

His audience of humanist-trained scholars, politicians and businessmen would probably not have found his declaration in any way unfamiliar. Among his peers, the past seemed always a pressure and a pleasure. What would have seemed controversial was his steely insistence. It cuts as might the thrust of a sword, or as does his absolutism. An historical law is adduced. It permits no refutation. It begs no exception. Even more controversial would have seemed his support of the idea with strictly modern evidence, plus his modernistic appeal to psychology: 'Let us not deceive ourselves; let us examine a bit, if you will, our situation; and let us begin by looking within.'⁸ 'Looking within,' or so his sense runs, suggests that the Republic needs to take stock of its inability to protect its citizens. The humiliating result has been that 'Pistoia, Romagna, Bargo [are] places that have become nests and refuges for every sort of thief.'

Just a short time ago, he recalls, the Republic's neglect of its interests had left it 'in danger of losing Arezzo,' a city whose problems he knew at first hand (it may be assumed that many in his audience would have been aware of his diplomatic experiences there). He then broadens the argument to indicate that his admiration of Cesare's tactics in no way contradicts his hostility to their despotic aims. He urges his audience to consider 'all Italy: you see her controlled by the King of France, the Venetians, the Pope and Valentino.'

One effect of switching perspective is to transform the speech into a kind of manifesto. A plea for new taxation becomes a demonstration of the need for a dramatic alteration of Florentine political life, and especially the Republic's indifference to maintaining a large enough army. His style also emerges as a combination of provocations, accusations and bits of hope, and this as he evokes a surprising vision of idealized republicanism.

Any republican system, he argues, requires a rooting in precisely the type of self-examination that he has been advocating: 'Other people often grow wise through the dangers of their neighbours; you do not grow wise through your own, you put no faith in yourselves, and you do not see the time that

you are losing and that you have lost.' A republican political life requires real stewardship of its freedoms: 'You are free Florentines and ... in your own hands rests your liberty. For that liberty I believe you will have such regard as they always have had who are born free and hope to live free.'⁹

If his idealism seems a bit forced, perhaps mostly in the context of a plea for new taxation, still it offers a reply to those who have argued that he harboured only the haziest interest in the Republic's democratic future. His interest, at least for the moment, seems to have been driven by a genuine passion.

It was no doubt a passion stimulated by his encounters with Cesare's treachery. In confirmation of this idea it may be noted that he had begun to revisit the hideous consequences of the Duke's betrayal at Senigallia, including his sacking of much of the city.

What seems clear is that Machiavelli had now decided to write up a far more detailed account of the tragedy than had appeared in his on-the-spot letters. Nor was his reason terribly obscure. As he reconsidered his sketchy reports, patched together in the heat of battle or the days just afterwards, he seems to have realized that a fleshed-out description, in which he arranged the events in a more plausible sequence, could allow the insights of art to illuminate an original tangle of horrors. A literary-historical approach might expose the order within the confusion. The issue of confusion aside, what he produced was one of the world's first if not most exquisite examples of the modern war correspondent at work.

A tactile atmosphere is probably not everything in the work of the war correspondent, but it inevitably matters greatly. Physical details point up patterns or their absence. These details rarely figure into the battle accounts of Machiavelli's close and exact contemporaries, Leonardo Bruni and Francesco Guicciardini, but he seems now to have set out to provide a mass of them, as in his description of the sites of Cesare's ambushes and their impact on the fighting, plus his speculations on the inner lives of the participants, each of which is presented as he sets the scene:

Whoever approaches Senigallia has on his right the mountains, with foothills that come so close to the sea that there is often only a narrow strip of land between them and the waves... . Senigallia lies a bow's shot from these foothills, and less than a mile away from the shore.¹⁰

Against these background strokes, but in a paragraph that requires a more or less full citation to show his close-up lens at work, Cesare's cunning leaps out with all its sinuosity:

Duke Valentino approached Senigallia. When the vanguard of his cavalry arrived at the bridge, it did not cross, but stopped and formed two lines, one along the river, the other along the open country, leaving a path in the middle for the foot soldiers, who then marched straight into the town. Vitellozzo, Pagolo and Duke Orsini of Gravina rode towards Duke Valentino on mules, accompanied by a handful of horsemen. Vitellozzo, unarmed and wearing a cape lined in green, seemed quite afflicted, as if he were aware of his impending death, which, in view of the prowess of the man and his former fortune, caused some amazement. And it is said that when he parted from his soldiers to go to Senigallia to meet the Duke, it was as if he was saying a final farewell. He told his generals that he had left his house and its fortunes in their hands.¹¹

The eruption of orchestrated violence ('had [Cesare] not put a stop to [his troops'] audacity in putting many of them to death they would have looted the town entirely'), including the first executions, is intimately handled:

When night came and the turmoil stopped, the Duke felt that the time had come to kill Vitellozzo and Liverotto. He had them taken to a place together and strangled. Neither ... uttered any words worthy of their previous life: Vitellozzo begged that he might throw himself on the Pope's mercy, ... while Liverotto heaped all the blame for the harm done ... on Vitellozzo.

The restraint here paradoxically emphasizes the Duke's barbarity by focusing on his victims' begging and blaming and not on the manner of their deaths. It is accompanied by psychological curiosity and leads into a matter-of-fact, chilling conclusion:

The Duke left Paolo Orsini and Duke Orsini of Gravina alive until he heard from Rome that the Pope had seized Cardinal Orsino, Archbishop of Florence, and messer Iacopo da Santa Croce. At this news, on the eighteenth of January 1502 [1503], they too were strangled ... at the Castle of Pieve.¹²

Only now, perhaps, does the reader take in Machiavelli's larger purpose: to provide an almost tactile accuracy. He rejects the monstrous. Exaggeration gives way to irony. It haunts his style, stressing his practicality.

All of which perhaps indicates why he and Leonardo now set about pursuing their project to alter the course of the Arno with a refreshed intensity: if nothing else, it also seemed practical.

For Leonardo, a meticulous sense of what worked had sharpened his worship of clarity ever since childhood. At this point he was as much a fanatic about strict accounting methods for saving money as a devotee of empirical data, performing his late-night autopsies to expose the veiny, muscular secrets of the human body. His *Mona Lisa* was as much a graph of emotional ambiguity as a portrait done on commission. His *Lady with an Ermine* was as much an investigation of fashions as a depiction of the sceptical beauty of Cecilia Gallerani.

From his point of view, painting without 'science,' or rational knowledge, had always seemed an absurdity. Since the 1480s, but perhaps as early as his apprenticeship in Verrocchio's studio, where he may for the first time have read Archimedes on hydraulics, he had trained himself to sketch the chameleon-like changes of water under pressure, or water-power. His drawings of stream-driven screws, turbines, drills and propellers appear to date from as far back as the turn of the century. His designs of dredges may be traced to just after 1501.

He had never regarded himself as a fully modern scientist, however, in the sense that empiricism seems never to have been his only guide to experience: throughout his career he wrestled with the medieval belief that the universe must be animate, as often adopting as questioning the common view.¹³ For him and everyone else the planets kept to their circular dance according to a divine choreography, each fixed in its revolving sphere. Outer space and the idea of complete darkness, or some concept of a near-perfect vacuum, lay beyond his or anyone's comprehension: 'Water is that which serves the vital humour of the arid earth; it is poured within it, and flowing with unceasing vigour through the spreading veins it replenishes all the parts that depend of necessity on this humour.'¹⁴ His hundreds of observations of water currents had led him to understand their strengths in canals, locks, rivers and brooks as well as their military and commercial value for espionage and shipping.

On 21 June 1503, he arrived at the fortress of La Vernucca on a hill overlooking the lower reaches of the Arno, with their flatlands, not far from Pisa. The whole area had just been seized by Florentine troops. His assignment was to examine the fortifications for weaknesses, deciding whether they needed strengthening against counterattacks. He stayed just two days, but in mid to late July, and escorted in a coach-and-six driven by Giovanni di Andrea Cellini, or *il Piffero*, as he was called (because he was one of the pipers for the Signoria), the father of Benvenuto Cellini, he came back to sketch the river as it meandered on to Pisa.

His proposal to redirect the river had by now attracted military interest. The Florentine Captain, Francesco Guiducci, reported, 'We studied [his] plan, and ... concluded that the project was very much to our purpose, and if the Arno can really be turned or channelled at this point, this would at least prevent the hills from being attacked by the enemy.'¹⁵ At least at first, the primary purpose of any diversion was therefore defensive. Machiavelli was not present at these discussions: in April he was sent to Siena to negotiate, uselessly, with Pandolfo Petrucci, who had now returned. There seems little doubt, however, given his more than ninety references to Leonardo's proposal for diverting the Arno in his reports to the Signoria, that he and Soderini were enthusiastic supporters.¹⁶

Leonardo stipulated a twelve-mile-long rechannelling, starting just before the river's descent to Pisa. A single immense excavation – or perhaps two – consisting of a ditch (or two) some 32 feet deep, would force the currents south toward Livorno, into a marshy area called the Stagno, and then past it to the sea.¹⁷ Several of Leonardo's sketches – including a detailed, almost-to-scale rendering of the rechannelling – have survived. Their details and measurements suggest a tentative commitment of Florentine officials to the project.

Despite these preparations, over the following months Leonardo devoted himself to other matters, and perhaps even to painting the *Mona Lisa*. Among these projects was a different sort of artistic challenge, as he produced his first sketches for a vast war-historical mural, the *Battle of Anghiari*, also commissioned by the Signoria. From the standpoint of the Arno idea, however, his time was not wasted. He spent some of it on calculating the costs and engineering requirements of the excavations.

Machiavelli himself had already taken note of the military value of eliminating Pisa's fresh water supply, extracted from the Arno, by means of a rechannelling (in July he urged Livorno to refuse to help Pisa with as much as a single drop of water). Leonardo concurred, and pointed to other advantages justifying the monumentality of the project, among them that the new channel would reduce the distance from Florence to the sea by over twelve business-profitable miles, and that 'guiding the Arno' would offer farmers new and sought after acreage for irrigation. The extra farmland ought to prove an agricultural 'treasure.'

About the project's monumentality there should have been little question, though its complexity must have accounted for some of the delay. Leonardo estimated the cost at 750 ducats per mile over twenty-five miles, based on the assumption that the great density of river water would require a channel twenty *braccie* wide at the 32-foot depth and that, if properly built, it would need a

service road twenty *braccie* across (3,000 *braccie* equalled one mile) running beside it. Two thousand workers would have to be hired.¹⁸

Late winter would be the best time to start, or even early spring, when the earth was still pliant. Little digging, with or without his as yet unbuilt machine designed to rotate numerous cogs and pails for scooping and lifting out large volumes of rock and soil, would be possible during the hot months of July and August.

That summer, at any event, with its anxious political, military and religious dilemmas, raised doubts about every project. On 18 August, Alexander VI, whose papacy and son had for years frightened many millions, died at Rome, sunk into a pasty, probably malarial fever and staggerings, as remonstrances flickered through his crowds of thirsty servants bobbing about the sweaty corridors of the Vatican, their cunning hushes accompanied by quicksilver thefts, not least of his personal property, down to the rings on his thinning fingers, which swelled in death.¹⁹

His generally welcome end, which brought Machiavelli to the ancient capital for the first time, as instabilities shivered through the bureaucratic foundations of an apprehensive Christian world, incited anxiety out of all proportion to the whispered last minutes on the papal bed. Like other officials, including the cardinals expected to assemble to elect a new Pope, Machiavelli seemed for a moment thrown off his stride, though not off his sense of the Republic's opportunities. The Pope's death was scarcely a surprise.

Cesare had always known about the mortal shadow looming back at him from his future. He had attempted to guard against his vulnerability once deprived of access to his father's money and the pride taken in his conquests. He had failed to anticipate his own brief, crushing illness, however, or that it might overwhelm him at the same time, or to imagine that it might stop him in his tracks. This illness, bearing down as his father slipped into unconsciousness, prompted a swift erosion of his influence and intimidated ruin.

For the Borgias, including Lucrezia, who arranged to spend the rest of her irritable, perfumed life as a pious recluse wrapped in spiritual devotion, Fortune's wheel had simply rolled on. This time it seemed to leave the triumphant defeated, the powerful abashed.

In the first weeks of August, however, these possibilities had still seemed unlikely. Two months earlier Cesare's forces had seized Camerino. Before that, he had threatened Urbino. Yielding to his fondness for treachery, he had

seized it as well, expelling his and Alexander's ally, the duke Guidobaldo, who fled to Mantua. News of Camerino's fall reached Rome on 23 July. When it was followed by reports that the town had surrendered without a fight, or on the strength of Cesare's reputation for vicious retribution, Alexander ordered a 'great salute' fired from the Castel Sant'Angelo, celebratory bonfires lighted, rockets shot off and a 'magnificent feast held at the Piazza di San Pietro.'²⁰

Throughout central Italy, the success of the papal states seemed more or less guaranteed. The father-son experiment in power-sharing ought to endure. Their political adventurism, based on murder, money, bribes, theft and a superficial religious devotion, should prove self-sustaining. The Vatican world itself, battered by Alexander's acquisitiveness, trembling before his and Cesare's changeable passions, might bustle on for years, or according to the whims of their authoritarianism.

The First Journey to Rome

A somewhat complementary development in the arts might now have seemed only appropriate. In Florence that summer, and into the autumn, Leonardo, followed a year later, in August 1504, by Michelangelo, who had begun his marble *David* in 1501 (it was to be unveiled to universal applause in 1504), was lauded for his abilities and then hired to paint a magnificent, fanciful fresco of victory in battle, eight metres high by twenty long. It would be intended as a theatre of political propaganda proclaiming the Republic's pride and freedom.¹

Both artists were offered contracts for one such massive fresco each. While these were abandoned long before they were finished, the two men would leave behind them at the Palazzo della Signoria, where the frescoes were meant to complement each other and to occupy equal-sized, opposed walls in the Grand Council chamber, some of the world's finest monumental cartoons. Lavishly detailed, and in parts fully worked out, their respective *invenzioni* would involve extensive depictions of weapons, battles, horses and soldiers far beyond what audiences for artistic displays had ever seen. Though no one might then have guessed it, the historical uncertainty in Rome would also be matched by the momentous artistic uncertainty in Florence.

By late October Machiavelli would have learned all about Leonardo's fresco preparations simply through keeping up his normal routines at the Palazzo. From the start he had been involved in negotiating Leonardo's salary and work schedule. He may even have been instrumental in securing the artist's commission, his first major one in his native city. An original if lost contract, dating to October, 1503, provided him with an advance of thirty-five florins, to be supplemented by fifteen florins per month till the job was done. Machiavelli also prepared a second contract, which superseded the first and was dated 4 May 1504. This reveals the Signoria's exasperation with Leonardo's constant delays – procrastination haunted his entire career – and stipulated a new deadline, for February 1505, but now with no excuses.²

Machiavelli's involvement in what soon became a testy rivalry between the two artists could also have been anticipated, as might his assignment to Rome after the death of Alexander. The papal fever seemed to incite realignments of art, diplomacy, propaganda, politics, war and religion. Machiavelli, Leonardo and Michelangelo might even have been seen as somehow blending their complementary passions and interests.

The theme alone of Leonardo's fresco – that of legendary violence leading into victory – and the space allotted for his preliminary work on it at the relatively new church of Santa Maria Novella, seemed appropriate to the changes presently afoot. Leonardo had watched this church built not thirty years earlier. He was now given its rectory as his studio, the Sala del Papa. The Signoria arranged repairs to its roof to keep the rain from splashing in, and it accommodated his immense cartoons. He picked up a refectory key on 24 October, on the same day as Machiavelli left for Rome, or as both entered a new political atmosphere.

Over the next few months Leonardo poured himself into realizing his unparalleled heroic vision. Large and small sheets of flax-rag paper acquired clots of clashing men and horses, or passionate, glittering groups, which he then blended into a scene-by-scene depiction of the Battle of Anghiari. The actual battle, fought in 1440, had been insignificant. No more than a skirmish, it had seen a contingent of Florentine soldiers driving off Milanese units commanded by Niccolò Piccinino. Sixty-three years later, though, in the cleared out, sunlit studio-area at the Santa Maria Novella, Leonardo's rolls of inky flesh seemed traumatized by their own exhibitions of unexamined rage, madness and callousness. Historical unimportance was transformed into a penumbra of artist-conceived, drenching ferocity.

Commentators on Leonardo's sketches have noted their deliberately blurred lines and sequences of dusky whirls, but the blurring itself seems an aspect of a novel investigation of motion, as if it were endless and feisty, and continuous in the universe. Reality itself, and not merely some long past battle reality, is understood as a series of undulations and processes, as flux and transformation, as an ancient Ovidian tumbling, or even shocking displays of metamorphosis.

His sketches seemed to flow forth as torn and ghastly meditations on life, death, victories and defeat, while pointing to shattered muscles, faces, eyes and cheeks. If the battle at Anghiari had been little more than an historical footnote – only one soldier had been killed, and this because someone's horse fell on him – Leonardo's renderings (guided in part by a written-up, exaggerated description mentioning thousands of troops and provided to help him out by

Machiavelli's office-mate Agostino Vespucci at Machiavelli's request) ushered into the world an anthology of battles and, more disturbingly, of wounds and change as divine judgements (plate IX).³

An evocation of war at its most horrific – even to suggesting its bleakness amid mud, shrieks, showers of lymph and its withering stench – seemed designed to carry the viewer through fearful episodes into an hallucinated Florentine triumph as sheer brutishness foamed against clouds of artillery smoke ('You must show the smoke of the artillery,' he had urged his fellow artists in a note, "How to represent a battle," many years earlier, 'mingling in the air with the dust thrown up by the movement of horses and soldiers'⁴).

A diorama of pain seemed to dally with honour, as had been requested, yet in the end to pay homage to incompleteness itself, or a frustrating lack of colour – he had not yet painted it – perhaps because the idea of finishing a triptych devoted to infinite violence might have seemed a contradiction. Nor, perhaps, would its incompleteness matter. His sketches alone formed a diagnosis of violence, including an understanding of the universe that promoted it.

One week before Leonardo's first Anghiari sketches saw the public light of day, on 22 September, Machiavelli missed out on the election of the new Pope. The aura of incompleteness now began to surround other events. Less than two months after his election, the old-new Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini, who had taken the name Pius III, became ill and died. White-haired, hunch-backed, learned, compassionate to the point of gullibility ('I have been deceived,' he said, as he berated himself for underestimating Cesare's deceit), learned, gouty, constantly smiling, he had been a compromise between noble and religious factions.⁵

His election, and the choice of his successor, were prepared and inspected like a hawk, though from the sidelines in his resentful weakness, by Cesare Borgia. The stouter, much friskier, sixty-year-old Giuliano della Rovere (1443–1513), a devotee of hunting, painting, the nursing of grudges, sculpture and soldiering, became Julius II as the votes for him in a nearly unanimous first ballot piled up according to the thousands that he spent on his own election.

Twisting in the helplessness of his probably malarial sheets in Rome after his father's death, Cesare saw his cobbled-together empire begin to crumble and fall apart. '[The Pope's] face ... changed to the colour of mulberry and was covered with blue-black spots,' recalled the papal secretary Burchard in respect to Alexander's rapid decay in the August heat. The frightened Vatican carpenters,

in their hurry making his coffin too short, had to ‘pummel’ his body into it, apparently breaking his legs.⁶

Ordering a confederate, Michelotto, to loot the papal treasury of 100,000 ducats might stave off the coming fragmentation, but not for long. No amount of money could suppress the appetite for vengeance among those – the Orsini and Colonna especially, but also the Vitelli and other leading families of the cities of the Romagna – whose estates and other possessions Cesare and his father had confiscated and whose seigniorial rights they had treated with contempt.⁷

As he recovered, he tried to terrorize the papal conclave about to elect Pius III. He would either force Pius’s election, or that of a Pope even friendlier to him, by seizing the Castel Sant’Angelo. This was a place that he knew, though not as the virtual prisoner among its barn-lofty halls that he now became. Bernardo di Betto (or Pinturicchio, 1454–1513), the Pope’s court artist, had painted quite a number of rooms at the Castello, mostly *a grottesche*, to satisfy Alexander’s pleasure-tormented tastes.⁸

For the garden below the tower, he had supplied various portraits of members of the Borgia family, among them those of Cesare and his sister Lucrezia, plus a group of ludicrously dishonest scenes elaborating an officially triumphal version of Alexander’s life. These misrepresented the French invasion of Italy under Charles VIII, and showed the King prostrating himself before the rotund, beaming Pope, and even holding his stirrup for him (these paintings are now lost).

Familiarity also abetted helplessness. Cesare’s efforts to use the castle as a kind of bludgeon with which to intimidate the enclave, as Rome steadied itself among masses of troops edging into riots, failed entirely. The commander at Sant’Angelo seemed unimpressed by his money, and refused to blink at his tantrums. His illness had cost him the initiative, and every effort to regain it foundered in the face of resentments levelled at him from all sides. As a mild embarrassment coughing his way among his paternal paintings, Cesare agreed in September to be trundled out of Rome on a velvet-covered stretcher – his recovery remained incomplete – to a nearby Borgia-loyal town protected by the French King.

At the same time, the short reign of Pius III offered Machiavelli and officials such as Cardinal Francesco Soderini, brother of Piero, who was to participate in the vote for the new Pope, an ideal moment to be sent to the Vatican. Between Pius’s death and the election on 1 November

of Julius II, he might supervise Florentine interests dependent on good relations with Rome. Oddly, Machiavelli now found himself in a position superior to that of Cesare. If he wished (but he did not), he might even have lorded it over the commander whom he had served as a liaison, and who had mesmerized the Signoria and his own early insights into the mechanisms of autocracy.

More immediately, the fantastical ancient capital of one of the world's oldest and most influential empires would have captured and held his attention. Despite his usual haste when on assignment ('You will proceed with all diligence to Rome,' the Signoria instructed him on 24 October, '[and] present yourself ... in our name, [now that we have] heard of the death of Pope Pius III, which has greatly afflicted our whole city⁹'), Machiavelli would have spotted and appreciated compelling elements of his own history amid an autumnal Roman atmosphere of cooling ruins.

At the Forum, the shaggy-looking pagan temples, unimproved by restorations, jutted into pockets of brown grass and staring sheep. What Nathaniel Hawthorne as late as the nineteenth century would call 'the bad odours of our fallen natures' freighted all the winds and breezes. As in many southern European cities, the houses of rich and poor languished amid effluvia and sweetening, suppressive scents. Poor families, less worried about public appearances, slouched *en masse* at their stoops in the cleaner if dreary outdoor air, chattering, napping, dicing. Horses, cats and pigeons rummaged in mounds of trash. Carriages whisked past in the gassy mud.

The recent Renaissance architecture, inserted among tatty, huge remnants of eviscerated ancient buildings, rose over the plushly robed figures of cardinals and bishops hurrying by, or the silks of the ambassadors (among them secretaries such as Machiavelli), and the tunics, striped hats and capes of thieves, jesters, brigands, slaves, actors and prostitutes lolling in the squares and alleys.

Rome seemed an ecstasy of decay tottering among its noble families and billeted foreign troops, mostly French and Spanish, who lounged at the palace entrances.

The daytime moonlight discoloured the stones and the youthful as well as constricted faces, commenting on their Etruscan, African and Roman complexions. It paused over an infinite loss amid the gabbled hawking that tumbled from doorway to doorway, mostly about the odds on the latest candidates for Pope.

Ramshackle markets teemed with fruit, flesh and fowl beneath cages holding criminals for a month or two of punishment. Spikes lined the bridges, displaying the impaled heads of convicted murderers left out as warnings. 'It is not safe ... to go out at night,' Machiavelli remarked in a letter detailing his contacts with cardinals and others working on the election of the second Pope in less than two months; '[at] night I can neither send nor go myself to enquire whether anyone ... is dispatching a courier to Florence, [as] it is not safe.'¹⁰ Information came to him via messengers surrounded by armed guards. A Roman population of under 50,000 fretted over its fourteen or so murders per day. If kidnapping was rare, theft was commonplace, and safety as elusive as political stability.

Cesare shuttled in and out of the wary Roman neighbourhoods in September and October in a useless quest for allies and influence. His army had shrunk by ninety per cent, to under 650. On 15 October, after a failed attempt to escape to Orvieto – his way was blocked by hostile troops – he barely made it back to the Castel Sant'Angelo. With his two young sons, he raced along a secret passage from the Borgo, where the Orsini had already started breaking into his house.

The death of Pius III provided some letup in the violence. It may have saved his life. He threw the last residues of his prestige – embodied in an appeal to the Spanish cardinals – into supporting the papal election of Giuliano della Rovere. This was a desperate gamble on behalf of an implacable enemy, or so Machiavelli thought, sceptical of the rashness of Cesare's judgement: his father Alexander had driven Giuliano into exile in France, a contemptuous act not easily forgotten. In fairness it may be added that Cesare perhaps had little choice: the prince who had once inspired dread seemed reduced to stimulating jitters.¹¹

Machiavelli's duties in relation to him emphasized their reversed roles while stressing the Signoria's friendliness to the new Pope, whoever he turned out to be. He had arrived in Rome on 27 October, or a few days before the second papal conclave, and took stock of Giuliano's good-politician promises to everyone, including Cesare, who was led to believe that he would see his cities in the Romagna restored to him.

After his election, though, the now Pope Julius exposed an obsession with righting family wrongs and his conviction that the needs of the Church ought to come before all other considerations. This seemed especially true of his pre-election promises, which he dismissed out of hand as he stomped in and out of explosive deliberations with his advisors. As a consequence, Cesare was

almost at once forced to prepare to move on. By contrast, Machiavelli seemed gratified by Giuliano's election, writing to the Signoria on 1 November, 'Under favour of God, I inform your Lordships [in a memorandum delayed, as so often] that the Cardinal di San Pietro in Vincola was this morning proclaimed Pope [Julius II]. May Heaven make him a useful pastor for all Christendom! *Valete!*'¹²

Cesare's leave-taking, encouraged by Julius, prompted rumours of his death and a fear that, whether dead or alive, he might come back: his reputation for astonishing supernatural acts seemed as lively as ever. In calling attention to the 'great celebrations' mounted in Florence on the election of the Pope, Landucci reported (on 28 November) that 'Valentino [has been] captured at Ostia, and [has] been beheaded,' then corrected himself according to the next reports: 'It [is] not true, however, that he [is] dead.'

The French army was eager to protect him but, mired in a retreat from Naples and abandoned by its own King, had lapsed into anarchy. In Rome, where French soldiers ran into a cold snap, they smashed their way into the nearest houses, fighting with the owners determined to keep them out. A new French reputation for theft and rape in southern Italy had preceded them, and in a demented quest for warmth, they snuggled into the city's dung-heaps. Over five-hundred died in the filth as others froze in the *piazze*.

On 9 November, Machiavelli's relative Battista wrote to him that Marietta had just given birth to a son, Bernardo, 'a fine, bouncing boy' named after his father. Battista looked forward to becoming one of the boy's godfathers, along with 'a fine gang' of others, or so Biagio Buonaccorsi informed Machiavelli on the seventeenth. Among the four others was Biagio himself.¹³

Cesare's Downfall and the First Decennale

Cesare had vacillated before leaving, and after being forced back to Rome by Julius, this time under temporary arrest for defying papal authority, he turned to desperate schemes that Machiavelli observed with a cold, bewildered interest: 'We see that the Duke's sins have little by little brought him to expiation. May God guide things for the best'. In Florence the proximity of the two men, pushed into repeated contact over several days, raised questions about Machiavelli's loyalty.

'[Giuliano della Rovere] will have enough to do to fulfil all the promises he has made,' Machiavelli informed his colleagues in Florence on 1 November, before it became clear that as Pope Julius he would keep few or none of them, 'but he is Pope now, and we shall soon see which course he is going to take.'

In less than a week Machiavelli was reporting back on 'the Pope's hatred of [Cesare];' which 'is notorious. And it is not to be supposed that [Julius] will have forgotten the ten years of exile which he had to endure under Alexander VI.' Julius's ruthlessness had already led him into barking and scoffing at officials and military commanders alike. His stentorian tone was beginning to make itself felt.¹

The general military stalemate in northern and central Italy was also upset by Venetian forces attempting to seize parts if not all of Cesare's rebellious Romagna. While this turn of events was in itself nothing new, as important Venetian banking and other commercial interests had often posed a threat to Florentine control throughout the region, the latest Venetian aggressiveness reinforced Cesare's hopes of being assigned command of the Pope's armies and regaining his prominence.

Unexpectedly, any such prospect was denied him by the apprehensive though not now overtly hostile Julius, and in compensation Cesare applied for a *condotta* from the Signoria. This would have allowed him to cross Florentine territories with the small number of troops, comprising a mere 'seven hundred

horse' and five hundred infantry, according to Machiavelli, that he had so far put together, paying for them with money stolen from his father's treasury.

The *condotta*, however, was also denied: the vaguest hint that his forces might parade across the Florentine Republic inspired more apprehension among the Signoria than any dangers posed by the Venetians. The Signoria felt reassured in one respect, however. As Machiavelli was aware, Cesare's rages seemed no longer to exhibit their previous theatrical grandeur. His moods had become 'irresolute, suspicious and unstable,' perhaps because 'of his natural character, or because the blows of fortune, which he is not accustomed to bear, have stunned and confounded him.'²

From Cesare's point of view, in fact, the future looked ominous, though neither he nor anyone imagined that the upshot of his vulnerability could be political after-effects rippling across the spreading Italian disunity over decades, or for that matter hundreds of years. The fickle twists of *Fortuna*, the dreadful wheel, combined with passion-dominated human choices, always seemed to most people governed by inevitable pulsations, or unaffected by social forces. Their mere existence, had anyone conceived of them, would have seemed incomprehensible.

Incensed by the Signoria's denial of the *condotta*, on 10 November Cesare did an about-face. He told Machiavelli that despite not having a commission he would launch his troops across republican territories anyway. He would tackle the Venetians on his own, or possibly with the Pope's tacit blessing. This dramatic stroke, he argued, would bolster his claim as an Italian and military leader still to be reckoned with.³

Perhaps unsurprisingly, he also seized on a chance for blackmail, announcing that 'if [the Signoria] hesitated or dealt unfairly with him, which would become manifest within four or five days, the time necessary for his envoy to come to Florence and write [back], he would make terms with the Venetians and with the Devil himself; or he would go and join the Pisans, and would devote all his money, his power and what allies remained to him to injuring our republic.' Even amid his diminished resources, his fascination with treachery, humiliation and abuse seemed to continue unabated.

These tactics, however, quickly proved useless. The *condottiere* Michelotto, who had helped him loot the papal treasury and his father's Vatican apartment, where troops under his command filched silver and plate worth hundreds of thousands of ducats, granting Cesare a temporary financial independence, headed into Tuscany with most of their hired troops. Cesare left for Ostia,

where he sought out a complementary route by sea to Spezzia, chartering five ships to ferry north his five hundred remaining infantry.

At Ostia, however, he ran into a lack of essential good weather for sailing, and had to wait, and part of his grand plan fell apart. In a test of his loyalty, Julius had ordered two cardinals to catch him up. They demanded that he turn over to the Vatican a couple of his castles in the Romagna.⁴ To their astonishment, he refused. Nor was he to be won over by Julius's promise that the castles would be returned once either the Venetian threat was eliminated or the Venetians defeated.

Arrogance may have addled him, or he may simply have blundered. Whatever the reason, his refusal proved his undoing. As the Venetians moved through the Romagna after seizing Faenza and Rimini, and their progress followed a declaration that their purpose was to rid the Romagna of the Borgias altogether, Julius, who lacked enough troops of his own, became frightened of what looked like the impending loss of the papal states. As a safeguard, he ordered Cesare's immediate re-arrest – a squad of armed men quashed a last-minute attempt at escape – and his forcible return to Rome. There he was locked up at the Vatican's *Torre Borgia*.⁵ The Pope's advisors argued for his execution, but Julius bided his time: Cesare's diminishing influence might still win over the hearts of thousands in the Romagna. It could even prove helpful should his own position *vis-à-vis* Venice deteriorate further: Machiavelli had by now come to view Julius, whom he met often, with guarded respect, or as guided by a 'choleric temper and [an] honourable character,' a mix of vitriol and reason.⁶

From a practical standpoint too, forbearance might prove useful in reducing Cesare to the role of a pawn in the competition between Venice and the Vatican while anxious members of the Signoria looked on amid their secret diplomatic reports, Machiavelli's among them. The outcome of all this squirming about could after all still be a Venetian invasion of the Republic.

Less reassuringly, Machiavelli's reports, delivered at his customary efficient pace, combined descriptions of Cesare's problems with demands that he be paid for his mailing costs and complaints about his (as he saw it) meagre salary ('if my salary cannot be increased, at least have me reimbursed for the postage'⁷). His reports had become harder to get through, despite specially hired couriers. The roads were 'wretched.' Military shifts were also outstripping his analyses at such a clip that it had become hard to keep up.

Plague had broken out in Rome and parts of the Romagna. By the end of November news of it reached Marietta in Florence. The news was followed by an

outbreak in the city itself and over 800 deaths: 'You know very well how happy I am when you are not down there,' she wrote, 'and all the more so now that I have been told that there is so much disease.'⁸ For some days she was ill herself, though not with plague, and unable to write. On recovering, she dared to hope for more than the three letters that she had received from him. Bernardo, their son, 'seems beautiful to me,' she noted, reproaching her husband's absence with affection, because 'he looks like you,' 'white as snow' and with a head 'like black velvet' and 'hairy.'

For Cesare, the future had turned bleak, though he kept trying to squirm ahead of it. On 30 November Michelotto was captured and his troops disarmed by 'the inhabitants of Castiglione and Cortona,' acting on behalf of the Pope and for the *condottiere* Gianpaolo Baglione and his own troops. His arrest amounted to an almost complete erasure of Cesare's military abilities, and Machiavelli told the Signoria that, to emphasize his debasement, the Duke was 'this morning [1 December] ... brought to the palace ... [and confined] in the chamber of the treasurer.'⁹

His dignity had collapsed amid a flurry of shouts, the cracking of whips, saddles and expensive shoes and furious raspings of iron and steel helmets, or the casual ticking of a cheeky doomsday clock in a post-chivalrous Renaissance world. Stripped of soldiers and officers, cursing his father, begging forgiveness of those he had harmed, while delivering a questionable outpouring of tears – or more likely some irritation of rationality – he had surrendered his castles in the Romagna, as requested.

Afraid of even more trouble, his friends deserted him and Rome. Machiavelli saw him 'slipping little by little into his grave.' Though everything seemed not quite lost, by mid-December 1503 Cesare's influence on affairs of state, not to mention military matters, had become a phantom of thinning speculations.

In contrast to his downfall, the early days of the following April found Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) busier than ever in Florence – for which Machiavelli himself finally set out on 18 December, 1503 – and dealing with his vastly improved artistic chances.

His 'almost finished' *David*, as would now be determined by a government committee including Leonardo, was to be accorded a place of honour and symbolic guardianship of the city beside the tall, buckle-bound doors of the Palazzo della Signoria. Leonardo had wanted to shunt Michelangelo's carved 'giant' off to one side, or into the Loggia, a spot less prestigious, but in

disregarding his wishes the committee may have been trying to paper over a well-known huffy rivalry between the two artists.

This had already found expression in a public exchange – which may also have occurred later – when, according to Anonimo Gaddiano, Leonardo was left ‘red-faced’ in a city street among a crowd of people, as on challenging Michelangelo to explain a passage in Dante’s *Commedia*, he had replied, ‘Explain it yourself – you who designed a horse to [be] cast in bronze, and couldn’t cast it, and abandoned it out of shame.’ His allusion was to Leonardo’s huge bronze statue, known as the Sforza Horse, which he had failed to finish.¹⁰

There had perhaps been other acrimonious exchanges between the two, which together spurred the Signoria into taking advantage of their mutual envy – it was more fiery on Michelangelo’s part – to stimulate their hostility for the benefit of the Republic. Such at any rate followed the bulky installation of Michelangelo’s finished *David* in August, with over forty men tugging and yanking the ponderous statue along fourteen greased and reshuffled pole-like beams over four days. He was granted a studio space suitable for his large cartoons, and comparable to Leonardo’s, in the *Sala grande* at the Ospedale di Sant’Onofrio. Here in late October – his contract was broached only in September – he set to work on his own war fresco, meant to outshine that of his rival, a triptych representation of the Battle of Cascina, according to an arrangement that stipulated payments in lire commensurate with what Leonardo was to receive.

The battle itself had taken place in July 1364. It had witnessed a rout of Pisan by Florentine troops, and so offered a theme juicy enough to satisfy members of the Grand Council and the Signoria. As with Leonardo’s *Battle of Anghiari*, and perhaps in a fit of Michelangelo’s notorious pique, it was to be left unfinished when he abruptly left for Rome and more lucrative commissions offered him by Pope Julius.¹¹

War as a stimulant to civilization, the terror of bloodshed and murder as horrible yet heroic premises of human improvement: these intractable historical impulses, as they then seemed, influenced the *invenzione* guiding Michelangelo’s preliminary work on his fresco, as they had Leonardo’s sketches, though Michelangelo’s approach to illustrating them was his own. Few if any of his contemporaries were likely to question the premises themselves. Machiavelli seems to have drawn even darker conclusions about the same ideas ever since his childhood experiences during the slaughterous aftermath of the murders at the *Duomo*.

Had everything gone as planned, the effect of the two frescoes would therefore have amounted to a triumph of realism: as members of the Republic's Grand Council engaged in deliberations, these two huge works of art would have provided roving eyes – and the opportunity to avoid them would have been more or less denied – with a feast of extravagant, rampant dishes of fantasized, persuasive slaughter.

Only one cartoon illustrative of Michelangelo's *invenzione* has survived, in the form of a grisaille-on-panel copy made much later, in 1542, and attributed to Aristotile da San Gallo: *Soldiers Bathing*. Startlingly, in the light of its military theme, this sketch (76.2 x 132.1 cm; plate X) offers up no violence at all, only twenty-one young men, if one takes as the twenty-first the two hands rising from the water at the bottom of the picture, who may be soldiers, and who are seen wrestling, heaving, gliding into tunics and tights, fondling their weapons, flexing well-toned muscles, gazing, pointing and lurching about naked or in stages of undress beside a pond or lake where they have been washing and relaxing. On either side of what seems to have been the centrepiece sketch, there would have been located, to the left, a cavalry scene showing some of the horsier preparations for battle, and to the right, a depiction of the battle itself.

In making sense of Michelangelo's unprecedented cartoon, or what at first appears a colossal jumble of faces and bodies, and for which he began to paste together outsized sheets of paper in anticipation of a public exhibition in the autumn of 1504, it may be useful to recall that he had always seen himself as much a poet, albeit an unpublished one, as a sculptor and painter, and that – a relevant fact in an era in which the medieval *canzone* still retained its popularity – he seems to have spent much of his time composing sonnets.

The still novel form, whose blend of compression with an invitation to meditation, including a compelling invitation to silent reading, resulting in a mix of rational argument and explosive self-confrontation, or a cunning provocation of intense self-conscious states, repeatedly attracted the sculptor of the Republic's *David*. Among Michelangelo's scores of surviving poems and fragments of poems, at least 64 are sonnets, and at least one, that beginning *Quand'il servo il signor d'aspra catena* [When the master binds his slave in the harshest shackles], a *caudato*, or twenty-lined, tailed specimen. His first-known efforts in the form appear to date from around 1504, or just as he finished his *David* and started work on *Soldiers Bathing*.¹²

These coincidences seem significant, not only because they mattered to Michelangelo himself, but also because his war cartoon presents a frozen

emergency of self-consciousness. External motion has been halted to allow the viewer to contemplate the inner tensions affecting the faces and muscles of a group of young men who are almost certainly preparing for combat. If Leonardo's sketches were intended to investigate motion sweeping across a battlefield, Michelangelo had settled on an investigation of the transforming conflicts within the bodies and souls of a group of Florentine soldiers.

Motion is thus treated as kinetic, or as a barely suppressed muscular energy on the verge of its stormy release. The twenty faces and bodies, superbly individualized as the warriors fling themselves up in alarm, fright, rage, scorn, suspicion, bloodlust and self-possession, are captured in a doubtful, thrilled response to the news that just over a nearby hill, unseen by them and the viewer, a battle has broken out.

Michelangelo's rendering of this decisive moment, comprising a knotty yet controlled unravelling of minds and bodies preparing to erupt into struggle, despair and an unknown but anticipated victory, is itself, or so one may finally come to accept, a type of visual, tailed sonnet: the twenty bodies, which may be understood as equivalent to the *caudate's* twenty lines of verse, are delivered before the viewing audience by the two hands emerging from the water below, which seem to show them off as catalysts in a military-political upheaval.

Partly as a result, compression counts for everything in Michelangelo's sketch, or so it seems, and this aspect is unusual for its captivating suggestion of a sound, or even a voice, expressed as silence. The announcement of a battle in progress, or about to begin, must be understood as washing over the sultry logic of the warriors' bodies pausing and petrified in dread, but for the viewer any sense of immediacy, or self-conscious emergency, is established by a warning, which has not been heard and cannot be heard.

The outcome is that the picture's dramatic success depends on an eerie absence, as the viewer strains to listen to an inaudible or soundless alarm raised in exasperation. The effect of this silence is extended by a strange isolation, the futile, wild staring about, as into some private space, of the soldiers themselves. Only two of them, at the centre, appear joined in a furious, comradely gaze. It serves as a beam balancing the exiled anxieties of the rest.

Machiavelli had himself been spending time straining to listen to almost inaudible warnings, as it were, or quiet alarms over a hill, and on occasion with success. The political and military twilight had intensified across Italy. Towards the end of 1504, during a concentrated two-week period in November,

he began to describe what he had heard, and for the first time for publication, though its appearance would not come until over a year later. His description took the form of a chronicle poem conceived along the lines of Dante's account of Roman history in the sixth canto of his *Paradiso*. Machiavelli's *Decennale Primo* [First Decennale] amounted to an ambitious reconstruction, or a quasi-objective memoir, of 'the vexations of Italy over [the previous] ten years.'¹³

The challenge lay in rendering recent Italian and more specifically Florentine history in 550 lively *terza rima* lines. As planned, his poem would reach back to the French King Charles' invasion of Italy in 1494, and forward into the seedy military and cultural 'miseries' of the present.

Abetting his commitment to writing it were probably two frustrating missions from which he had just returned, plus a technological-military fiasco in which he had participated and which had cost the Republic much in lives and money, to the tune of about 7,000 ducats. Contributory too may have been the insulted reactions to his controversial proposal, placed before the Signoria and members of the Grand Council back in May, to create a new type of state-sponsored citizen militia.

As conceived, this unusual army, whose inspiration is traceable into precedents reaching back to thirteenth-century Florentine history, and methods that he had seen Cesare Borgia sometimes adopt, would have replaced nearly all the Republic's mercenary soldiers with local volunteers. The mere thought of any such innovation, however, chiefly because the recruits would be deployed defensively, had stirred outrage among Council members. They insisted that under no circumstances could some ramshackle collection of amateurs be turned into soldiers capable of ensuring the Republic's safety. Far from doing so, and possibly at the behest of the *ottimati* or even Piero Soderini, they might simply take over the city.¹⁴

It remains uncertain that this or any of his missions now inspired him to take a stab at epic-historical verse, though all four exercises, including an attempt, at first with Leonardo and then with others, at last to have a go at diverting the Arno – which produced the technological fiasco – returned him to familiar situations.

They had all changed, as had the people involved in them, or as for that matter had Cesare, a soldier whose prestige seemed for the moment consigned to the dust heap of fantasy and legend. Early January 1504, for instance, or the first of his missions, had seen him once more in France, but not to mend fences, as a few years earlier. A new Spanish threat was emerging in well-equipped

attacks and supported by a flotilla disgorging an invasion force not far from Naples. It ignited wild battles over the city, and seemed about to lead to the loss of a large chunk of Italian territory in the south, and possibly even into distracting the French from protecting Florence in the north.¹⁵

A defeat of the French would allow the Spanish a relatively complete domination of central Italy. As the Spanish victories piled up and the French appeared headed into withdrawals – King Louis had already relocated his headquarters to Lyons – the risks rose high enough to nudge Machiavelli into offering the Signoria a bet that he could handle a relief-seeking trip into the north to the French court, by horse and via Milan, in just six days, no easy task over the hundreds of hilly miles.

Omitting the two days that he set aside for talks with King Louis's minister Charles D'Amboise, himself then in Milan, and who flippantly denied the importance of the Spanish menace, Machiavelli won his bet and by mid-January was in Lyons. He hoped for negotiations, however, to be undertaken with the Florentine ambassador, his friend Niccolò Valori, and intended to induce the French, despite their evident embarrassment, to deliver military aid to the Republic, inched forward at only a snail's pace, if not without results.

His near failure in Lyons was succeeded on 2 April by his mission to Piombino, just south of Pisa. Here telltale signs of war, focused on the districts around Siena, had attracted the attention of the Signoria. Jacopo d'Appiano, with whom Machiavelli had bickered over salary demands in March 1499, now seemed eager to swing his forces into backing the Pisans. Machiavelli was sent off to evaluate Jacopo's war-preparations.¹⁶

He harboured no illusions about the strategic value of either mission except as a stopgap in the face of Spanish encroachments. Italy seemed on its way to becoming a feeding trough for imperial Iberian appetites. Their indulgence looked likely to be arranged by their elegantly dressed and astute commander, Grand Captain Gonzalvo Fernández da Córdoba, even as the French kowtowed before a superior Spanish military dazzle.

Machiavelli had recorded his distaste of the French in a prickly memorandum, *De natura Gallorum*, following his first visit to France in 1500. This document echoed prejudices that they might well have reciprocated: '[They] are so intent on immediate advantage or injury that they have little memory of past wrongs or benefits, and little care for future good or evil;' 'While they may not be able to do you a good turn, this does not hinder them from promising to do so;' 'They are miserly rather than cautious.'¹⁷

Weighed against an increasing French battle-squeamishness, as he saw it, his own efforts to stimulate Louis into taking the field against the Spanish might easily – as almost happened – prove worthless. Despite his hurried trip into the north, therefore, he was hardly surprised at failing to win a warm or fast audience with the French King. Louis, it was whispered, had been rendered speechless by the news of his latest military reverses in the south.¹⁸

These difficulties aside, Machiavelli's missions seem subtly to have contributed to a fragile peace that by late 1504 began to settle across Italy, the outcome of a surprising three-year truce concluded in late March between the French and Spanish monarchs. A tranquil moment, understood as unlikely to last, may as much as his almost useless diplomacy have allowed him to feel free to devote fifteen days to his *First Decennale*.

As early as April, he could in any case have been found writing poetry, though of another sort and meant to be set to music as a now lost love song. He sent it off to Francesco Soderini, who was still acting as the Republic's ambassador in Rome, and who was glad to get it: 'I was pleased by the verses you say you wrote... We shall save them for when we can sing them and accompany them on the rebec.'¹⁹

None of this should be construed as implying that the collapse of his Arno project had not proved equally disastrous. For one thing, Leonardo had withdrawn his participation. For another, his replacement, a hydraulics expert, Maestro d'acque [*sic*; Master of water] Columbino, had turned out to be incompetent. Renewed enthusiasm for pushing ahead with the diversion had emerged only because of the military paralysis resulting from a setback at Pisa in the summer of 1504. On the Florentine side, and lasting through July, the prospects at Pisa had at first looked promising. Even the Pisans acknowledged that near-siege conditions established by Florentine mercenary troops rendered 'it [impossible] for a man to leave ... without running great danger.' Francesco Soderini had written optimistically to Machiavelli that 'you are not [now] going to have such obstacles that, if you are willing to do quickly what is required, you cannot take Pisa by force.'²⁰ Within weeks, however, several reversals turned the whole undertaking into an abject failure.

Leonardo's withdrawal should perhaps have aroused forebodings. In July his father, ser Piero da Vinci, had died at the age of eighty. Leonardo's relations with him had been cool, though his grief seems to have been genuine. Among his two sisters and nine brothers, his father left him alone nothing in his will.²¹ The neglect may or may not have affected him. By August, however, he was at Piombino, taking up a new position as military advisor (it had perhaps

been arranged by Machiavelli). To Piombino's minor prince and ruler, Jacopo d'Appiano, Leonardo presented a novel idea to level only the upper portions of the outer Pisan walls with cannon, as preparation for an invasion to pour into the city straight over them rather than through the conventional bottom and central gaps laid open by indiscriminate artillery fire.

His idea was never tested. Reports of well-trained Pisan reinforcements, detected by the Republic's spies in the city streets, as many as two thousand infantry, mostly smuggled-in Spanish troops, and other armed men, discouraged Florence's already nervous mercenaries. With Machiavelli's support, therefore, thousands of ducats and gangs of hired workers were recruited, combined and pressed into implementing a variation of Leonardo's original scheme for the Arno, but this time directed by Columbino.

An aloof if sloppy engineer, he seems to have misunderstood his predecessor's calculations for the adequate design of ditches roomy enough to accommodate a river diversion, crucially forgetting to make them several fathoms deep. As the late-summer rains poured in, slashing through the dug-up swamplands, over eighty workers drowned or were buried in floods and mudslides.

All the remaining teams of diggers and the troops guarding them were ordered out. The project itself was abandoned amid slovenliness and horrified chagrin ('The work of turning the Arno to Livorno was set in hand,' noted Landucci on 22 August, 'but it was not continued'; 'It gave us great pain,' Francesco Soderini complained in a letter of 26 October to Machiavelli, 'that so great an error should have been made in those waters that it seems impossible ... that it should not have been ... the fault of those engineers, who went so far wrong. Perhaps it also pleases God'²²).

The diversion's gruesome finale perhaps served as the tipping point for Machiavelli to switch into the more appealing task of writing his *First Decennale*, a poem which remains impressive not only for its imaginative aspects but for clarifying his insights so far into history, or indicating how he believed it ought to be written by the committed poet-investigator.

He dedicated his poem to the prominent (Machiavelli calls him, in Latin, 'pre-eminent') Alamanno Salviati, the former leader of the Signoria, at whose invitation, he announces, conventionally if somewhat improbably, he has composed it, in Italian.

He notes that his aim is to present a history that will be selective, not just for the sake of conciseness, or even for illuminating recent events, but for

describing an Italian and specifically Florentine tragedy, which he terms a 'misery.' Florence, if not Italy, he argues, has been almost destroyed by French and other invaders. The Republic's prosperity has been wrecked, its culture assaulted. In despair, he has taken up his chronicler's pen to reveal how the sabotage began, rose to a crisis and finally reaped the whirlwind.

He also implies another, more majestic purpose. In composing his history in the *terza rima* form that educated people would recognize as having achieved its sensuous perfection at the hands of the most sublime of Italian poets, Dante, and having soared to heights of expressiveness with Petrarch in his sonnets, he indicates his desire to discover amid the horrid events that he plans to cite, and despite their blood-stained barbarity, the healing strength of aesthetics. His lines will be ennobled with a famous linguistic music and metaphorical beauty. They will exhibit amid their tones and keys a calamity more dramatic than that of mere misery: an ethical collapse, or even tragedy, but wedded to the hope of finding amid its chaos a terrified redemption.

A measure of his success lies in the fact that, to his consternation and that of his friends, the *Decennale* was almost immediately stolen. A pirated edition appeared in early 1506, within weeks of its first publication.

The poem's aesthetic qualities also attracted quite a bit of attention. 'A few days ago,' Ercole Bentivoglio, Captain General of the [Florentine] Army, wrote to him on 25 February, 'I received ... your poem, a brief history of the past ten years. Seeing with how much elegance you have discussed in it all the things that have occurred in that time, I cannot help but admire and praise profoundly what you have accomplished.'²³

Overwhelmed by the poem's evocation of a depressing past, however, Bentivoglio seems to have missed Machiavelli's point about the future. Following a vivid description of Charles' invasion of Italy, his retreat and an account of King Louis's invasion and his own retreat, and between them a summary of the seesawing battles that Cesare Borgia had launched across Tuscany and other provinces, the *Decennale* in its final lines turns its full attention to an 'unexpected road to salvation.'

This lies, so Machiavelli indicates, in the Republic's setting up his citizen militia: 'We trust in the skilful steersman [an allegorical reference to Piero Soderini], in the oars, in the sails, in the cordage; but the voyage would be easy and short if you [Florence] would open the temple of Mars.'²⁴

Salvation lies at hand, but only for those willing to open the gates of Mars, or war, and release into combat the Republic's own soldiers. The *Decennale* gains a tragic power as the reader comes to understand that Machiavelli has pitched

his appeal backwards into the Republic's misery, viewing Florence less as the victim of outside rapacity than its own passivity, as yearning for rescue instead of summoning up its considerable if neglected assets:

All Tuscany was in confusion; so you lost Pisa and those states the Medici family gave to the French.// Thus you could not rejoice as you should have done at being taken from under the yoke that for sixty years had been crushing you,// because you saw your state laid waste; you saw your city in great peril, and in the French arrogance and pride.²⁵

The tercets seem to glow almost atrociously through his description of French cruelties under Charles, the nephew of the king from whom over the past few weeks he has been seeking military assistance:

So with his conquering army he moved upon the kingdom like a falcon that swoops or a bird of swifter flight,²⁶

and his history glimmers with betrayed terror as he cites the sufferings of ordinary people:

Long would it take to tell all the injuries, all the deceits encountered in that siege, and all the citizens dead from fever.²⁷

In its last stanzas Machiavelli's memoir of the Republic's destitution seems actually to delight in its fantastical and willowy dreadfulness ('Of how many mountain paths, of how many swamps must I tell, full of blood and the dead through the vicissitudes of splendid kingdoms and states'²⁸), and a painful, commiserating wit ('Thus my spirit is all on fire, overwhelmed now with hope, now with fear, so much that it wastes to nothing drop by drop'²⁹).

Radiating an exhausted melancholy, the lines nonetheless rejoice in their insistence, which Machiavelli shared with his contemporaries, that history always has a meaning, even if a cruel one. So pervasive is his conviction that the reader may overlook various misstatements (Louis XII, it may be recalled, rescued rather than assaulted Florence: in Machiavelli's favour, however, his picture of Cesare tricking his nominal allies into entering Senigallia – he calls the Duke a 'whistling basilisk'³⁰ – seems apropos). The poem may linger longest in memory as a paean to a sacrificed form of civilized order, if not to a travestied population that, he believes, has lost its way.

Anarchy and the Citizen Militia

Yet it was just afterwards, and in the Republic's small towns rather than in Florence, as new forms of disorder spread into rural and urban worlds alike, soon giving way to new bouts of mayhem, that he managed to take advantage of the belatedly granted permission to recruit citizen-soldiers for his new militia, doing so by their dozens, hundreds and thousands. How would they behave if trained, equipped and flung into battle against an enemy? Would they flee, or stand and fight, behaviour rare enough among mercenaries?

Cesare had cut and run, it seemed, from his own recent opportunities, and at last surrendered. As Pope Julius's agent, Cardinal Maximilian Carvajal, took possession of his two castles at Casena and Bertinoro, and because Julius incorrectly expected that the Duke's other castles would be turned over to him, he was set free at Ostia in April 1504.

He quickly fled by ship to Naples, there to be welcomed by his uncle, Cardinal Luis Borgia. He was treated to a far chillier greeting by the Spanish commander, Gonzalo. His plans remained unchanged: to hire troops (he assumed with Spanish help), to sweep back into the north, to reclaim his lost territories in the Romagna and to resume his previous unquestioned authority.

The Spanish King, Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452–1516), felt completely out of sympathy with these (as they seemed to him) personal fantasies. It scarcely mattered that Cesare was a fellow countryman, and he responded with treachery of his own. More anxious to curry favour with the Pope than to support his nephew's recovery of territory, on 27 May 1504 he ordered Cesare's arrest.¹

Deprived of his castles, soldiers, weapons and money, reduced to the humiliations of poverty and even the unclean clothes on his back, he found himself brusquely shipped off to Spain as the King's prisoner, where on his arrival he was locked up in the royal fortress at Chincilla. A bit later, when Ferdinand became anxious that the fortress might not hold him – Cesare's sympathizers, or those still enchanted with the legend, tried one getaway ploy after another

– Ferdinand had him transferred to a more secure castle at Medina del Campo, where he was better watched and well treated.

No evidence in Machiavelli's career and life to date suggests a parallel experience of isolation. He knew even less of exile, though it may be emphasized that either punishment, whether in politics or private life, would have differed in its meaning and effects from its modern versions. If in his day ostracism bore an acrid odour of darkness, substantiality and silence, still it seemed psychologically milder than the brutal invasiveness of modern tortures of the mind: sense-deprivation experiments, maimings by drugs, needles and electrodes and the assaults on personality unleashed by brain-washing.

In a semi-Christian universe, the punishment of exile, while swathed in disgrace, implied its alternative of rescue. It might glisten with vague possibilities of mercy, and even hints of the divine. While appalling the body, it could preserve and even nourish the spirit. Some recognition of the singular unpleasantness of the sixteenth-century Florentine punishment of ostracism or exile can thus be more than helpful in contemplating Machiavelli's possible sensations as for the first time he faced the likelihood of his expulsion by a majority on the Grand Council. Its more conservative members had turned hostile to his presence in government, or alarmed at what seemed his seditious intentions, born of his advocacy, starting in 1504 and running into the succeeding months and years, of a citizen militia. His goal of Florentine military success had provoked strong suspicions of his possible disloyalty.

It may also seem unsurprising that a helpful way to understand the experience of exile in his day seems to lie in wandering among illicit Florentine pleasures after dark, as well as recalling the universal belief in the Ptolemaic-Christian cosmic world.

Festive occasions, judicial decisions (executions and wrenchings on the *strappado* usually proceeded at night), crimes (smuggling at the city gates, robberies, murders, mostly after-dark affairs as well), drinking sprees and outlawed sexual pursuits: all sought out the unique, hedonistic and isolating nightfall reaching among the city's taper-lit streets and alleys. Alchemy and magic, the casually blessed amulet or figurine, the magician's or witch's cauldron, the garbled incantation, saturnine masks, star-studded hats and quavering spell-castings – each for the sake of better friendships, finances, children and love-making – could have been bought at the nearest street corner, or discreetly during a post-sunset rendezvous with an alchemist, witch or magician.

Gioventù, or the love of boys, retained an enticing, *sub rosa* popularity, despite ferocious laws requiring the execution or banishment of anyone caught engaging in it. The Via dei Pellicciai was a haunt of male prostitutes. Two taverns, the Buco, near the Ponte Vecchio, located in an alley that still bears its name, and the Sant'Andrea or del Lino, near the Old Market, supported a trade in adolescent boys, who might have been spotted as well in the *piazza* at the *Duomo*, at least until a few years later when they were chased off. Still other taverns accommodated heterosexual pleasures: the Bertuccie, Chiassolino, Fico, Malvagia, Panico, Porco [the Monkey-Pussy-Ugly Whore, Little Whorehouse-Little Confusion-Little Outhouse, Fig-Cunt, Wicked Woman, Panic, Pig].²

Many of these cheerless establishments, poorly lit to hide the identities of customers and vendors from a roving constabulary, and fitted out with squat, lithe shadows, woody wine casks and musicians grinding away at polished rebecs as they ministered to the eager, exhausted, cynical, naïve, wretched and lonely, rattled on not far from the Palazzo della Signoria, where Machiavelli and his colleagues laboured into the evening, decoding dispatches, considering state expenses, writing up their reports. Sleazy escapes awaited them down the street, should their interest in work flag a bit.

Close by too arose a more awe-inspiring escape, equally available by night, an untouchable display of the unveiled stars, planets and angels, or Heaven as most people conceived it. As they also believed, the stars offered a glimpse into the very brains of God. Their proximity, soaring above the cobblestoned dark with its incivilities, and disputing earthly pleasures, could no more be dismissed than sin itself. Even the poor street lighting rendered clearer the rivalry between hired sex and spiritual freedoms.

Those wandering the streets – and never mind the others pent into the darker countryside – thus knew a good deal about the miracles lying beyond the transparent blackness sailing between the Earth and the sphere of the stars, or the *stellatum*. Since ancient times, Western peoples had understood the minute stars to be God's far off intelligence shining through tumescent, ancient holes, more than a little like divine pinpricks puncturing the sphere itself. If Heaven lay far off and high above, its relative closeness, with the idea of infinite space unknown, remained reassuring. Salvation lay past the measurable expanse that might be traversed by virtuous acts.

The crucial choices of life, or so everyone felt, lay either at one's feet or over one's head. The idea of uncertainty had just begun to become fashionable, and for most the dark retained its vitality. It seemed no mere absence of light, as

Leonardo, who lacked many religious and other superstitions, had long since begun to see it.

Machiavelli's world therefore encouraged few of the tormenting doubts that some decades later would be articulated by Hamlet, Macbeth, Don Quixote and Juliet: angst-provoking enquiries into being and not being, or the lonelier, amputated, more modern human condition. The terrors of conscience failure seemed manageable rather than irrational. The void was unknown. Even physical pain seemed less threatening if more voluptuous, perhaps because everywhere there seemed to shine wild streaks of doom and glory.

'Do not leave off,' Francesco Soderini urged him on 29 May 1504, as he drifted into what seems to have been disillusionment, after a first debate on his proposal for a citizen militia. 'Perhaps the favour that is not given one day will be given another.' Throughout the controversy, Machiavelli looked to the Cardinal, the brother of Piero Soderini, as his trusted ally: 'The argument against the militia is not good in a thing so necessary and so sound: and they cannot be suspicious of the force, which will not be raised for private, but for public, convenience.'³

Yet suspicious many remained, even into late 1505. By then, Piero had arranged to bring the matter to a vote in the smaller Council of Eighty. He was assisted by a lengthy description of how the militia ought to be designed and run, which had been written up for the Council of Ten by Machiavelli. In winning the smaller council's approval to recruit Republican soldiers, however, Soderini appeared to quite a few only to have boxed the opposition into a sullen silence.

The new vote, before January 1506, gave Machiavelli the licence he sought, and took him into the Republic's rural districts – to the Mugello, for example, the hilly region undulating amid its farms and villages, where years ago he had spent a few childhood summer months at the house of his uncle Giovanni, his mother's brother.⁴

He rode eastward as well, into Casentino and other villages, consulting the tax records, or *catasti*, for help and then ordering all prospective soldiers between the ages of fifteen and forty to report to him.

Their age range was probably determined by his knowledge of ancient Roman methods of organizing legions. The Romans had deployed the age groups in tandem, with combat squares of older veterans placed behind those

younger and less experienced. The younger bore the brunt of the attacks while the veterans were employed as tested reinforcements.⁵

Importantly, Machiavelli's permission to recruit seemed unaffected by his never having served in an army. Even his political enemies recognized that his administrative and battle experience was extensive. He knew the rhythms of sieges, the design and manufacture of weapons, the logistics of attacks, military supply problems and how to schedule the necessary financing of troop formations. Of great value was his having spent years poring over ancient Greek (in translation) and Roman military histories, with their accounts of the patterns of successful battles, along with other books that offered tips on tactics and how wars in the republican and imperial Roman periods had most effectively been fought – by Livy (running back through his boyhood readings with his father), Xenophon, Plutarch, Tacitus, Polybius, Frontinus and Vegetius, and recent accounts by such authorities such as Leonardo Bruni.

Nor was this to be his first experience in recruiting native soldiers. The collapse of the Republic's mercenary army at Pisa, just prior to the futile attempt to divert the Arno, had seen the service of over two thousand conscripts, all native-born and recruited by him, a desultory lot, ragged, ill-mannered, ill-trained, yet fielded as part of an expedition that, even though in the end it accomplished little, had carried some of the Ten's highest hopes. No Florentine soldiers had fought at Pisa, but many had answered the call.

The prospect of enlisting much larger numbers, though, or as many as 10,000, the announced goal, presented special problems. If the members of the Grand Council had worried about the possibility of citizen-soldiers seizing the capital, any recruiter of rural soldiers, chosen precisely for their unthreatening distance from the city, had to contend with the animosities of their towns and villages, or their jealousies, rivalries and allegiances which often ran back centuries.

'Two causes have contributed to give me the greatest trouble in this matter [of conscription],' Machiavelli wrote to the Signoria on 5 February. 'The one is the inveterate habit of disobedience of these people, and the other is the enmity existing between the populations [for instance] of Petrognano and Campana,' who occupied opposite sides of a mountain.⁶

Conscripts often objected to joining unless guaranteed service under their village or clan leaders. Still others would do so only if at liberty to report at certain times of the year, usually exclusive of the harvest and planting seasons. Most were indifferent to the reality that war paid no attention to convenience, or that

an army's usefulness lay in its reliability. Over the next few snowbound weeks, Machiavelli interviewed hundreds of candidates, winnowing them accordingly (an attraction for new soldiers, in addition to minimal pay, was that the Republic promised to forgive their debts). In one district, a typical case, he accepted only 'about seven hundred choice men' out of twice the number.

His newly recruited units also needed constables to supervise them, and weapons, such as pikes and short swords. These had to be delivered from Florence. Most were dispatched by 5 March, along with identifying banners, emblems and standards. Snow delayed the arrival of everything.

Essential as well was hiring an overall commander. Everyone agreed that for reasons of civil mistrust (the commander might himself conspire to take over the city) he ought not to be a Florentine. Because the troops lacked experience, he should also be a *condottiere*. Machiavelli's first choice, made on returning to Florence in February, was Cesare Borgia's captured, knowledgeable henchman, Michelotto. He had just been let out of prison by Pope Julius. Michelotto's reputation for viciousness, however – he often preferred strangling his enemies for no apparent reason – had led to his being hated and shunned. He won only lukewarm approval from the Council of Eighty, amid the reservations of influential citizens such as Piero Guicciardini, a brother of Francesco. Piero worried that Michelotto's sadistic temperament could easily render him uncontrollable and likely to turn on his employers. On 19 April, however, he was hired anyway, and over the following summer, true to form, directed 150 of the new troops on raids against Pisan farms. He torched houses and slaughtered livestock. Within a year he had predictably been removed from office. A bit later he was killed in a battle.

On 15 February, though, Landucci was anxious to record his impression of Machiavelli's recruits. About four hundred of them, summoned by the *Gonfaloniere* Piero Soderini, were assembled in the *piazza* before the Palazzo della Signoria. City officials had provided these 'Florentine peasants' with a sort of uniform, 'a white waistcoat, a pair of stockings, half red and half white, a white cap, shoes, and an iron breastplate and lances, and to some of them [arquebuses]. [The units] were called battalions; and they were given a constable [astutely, from a district other than their own] who would lead them, and teach them how to use their arms. They were soldiers, but [remained] at their own houses, being obliged to appear when needed.'

Landucci reflected the by now growing public enthusiasm for the future of the citizen army: 'It was ordered that many thousand[s] [of these soldiers] should be

[recruited] in this way all through the country, so that we should not need to have any foreigners. This was thought the finest thing that had ever been arranged for Florence.⁷ Whether finest or simply practical, Machiavelli's battalions retained a flavour of originality, if not quite as Landucci had assumed. Armies made up in part of citizen-soldiers had for decades been deployed by France, Germany and Spain. As was the case since the military reforms of Charles VII of France in 1445, however, they were organized by kings, and consisted of soldiers answerable to them or an occasionally treacherous nobility.⁸ Machiavelli's innovation lay in the principle (his friend Biagio termed it his 'invention') of an army of citizen-soldiers answerable to other citizens as well as to citizen institutions.

The difference implied a shift in the relations between war and politics. It promised, if retained, other important changes. Bellicose greed, paralysing instabilities, poisonous hatreds and the cunning of military profiteers, all masked by lies about motives, might be suppressed to a great extent by military arrangements made among citizens acting in concert with other citizens. At a minimum, various grisly impulses would be reduced. A distant but significant antecedent of this shift, as Machiavelli knew, was to be found in the armies of Cicero's Roman Republic. The danger in Cicero's day lay in the option granted to Roman soldiers, mostly for reasons of morale, to swear allegiance to their commanders instead of the state. Ultimately, the arrogating of personal loyalties over patriotism contributed to the fall of the Republic. It was a mistake that Machiavelli was determined to avoid.

A law setting up the new militia, but grounded in his earlier description of it, his *Discorso dell'ordinare lo stato di Firenze alle armi* [Discourse on the military organization of the State of Florence], was granted broad legislative approval in December 1506. It stipulated that during times of peace the militia would be administered by a civilian committee, or board of Nine, and during times of war by the Ten of War, or Dieci, on which Machiavelli continued as Secretary.⁹

The first board of Nine was elected on 10 January 1507, with him appointed as its first chancellor. The appointment more than satisfied him, even as it implied a considerable amount of work yet to be done to improve the new army. On becoming the Nine's chancellor, moreover, he seemed in the eyes of many to have redeemed his devotion to government service, and on a more elevated level and with greater opportunities to influence policy than before.

Throughout the Republic, it should be understood, the atmosphere of violence also boosted support for the citizen militia. Not all of this violence, which

reached back into the years before 1500, was visited on the peasantry and citizens by invading armies. Ruffians, thugs and murderers, often acting in gangs, spread their own terrors and stimulated a general desire for a military authority operating more or less at will among the Republic's towns and villages, no matter how risky to personal freedoms they might be.

Historians such as Francesco Guicciardini took note of the scores of citizens killed in their beds for their money and other property, of the quantities of blood gratuitously spilt, of the casual stabbings, the vendettas and robberies carried out in the remote lanes, alleys and forests.

Most of these crimes could not have been prevented by the new militia acting alone. On the other hand, its presence might provide comfort, lightening as well as policing the urban and rural shadows.

Exactly this happened in spring 1506, under the crude leadership of Michelotto, who meted out arbitrary punishments requested by the Signoria with a swaggering contempt. A more welcome form of relief, just as violent but mitigated by prayers and good humour, was to be seen in the unexpected military campaigns of Pope Julius II.

Immediately on assuming his papal office, Julius, soon to be dubbed 'the warrior Pope,' revealed his determination to make use of the tenuous peace between the kings of France and Spain. Quiescence might let him seize the Romagna while taking control of important adjacent territories. Venice might be humbled.

A taste for battle induced him to launch an invasion. At night on 25–26 August 1506, in the wake of Machiavelli's recruitment successes, the Signoria ordered him to bring a message to Julius, indicating the Republic's approval of his contemplated forays against the rebellious cities of Perugia and Bologna.¹⁰ Machiavelli joined Julius's progress, already underway and glittering in armour, tuneful pipes and pomp across the countryside, at Nepi, some twenty-five miles northeast of Rome. He gained an audience with the Pope at Civita Castellana, and there delivered a speech full of eloquent phrases in 'praise of [his] good and holy intent.'

Machiavelli had been instructed to accompany him, while also urging restraint in his deployment of his 400 men-at-arms, with their 'two cross-bowmen for each lance.'¹¹ These were complemented by a contingent of musicians, a costumed choir, chefs and twenty-four none too happy cardinals, most of whom exhibited no enthusiasm for going to war.

To everyone's amazement, however, and especially in consideration of his comparative military weakness, Julius declared his purpose to be the

reestablishment of papal authority throughout the recognized papal states. Machiavelli assured him that not only would the Signoria support his efforts but that he could expect a safe-conduct through republican territories, and even extra troops, should he require them.

About the troops Machiavelli need not have worried. Julius boasted that 'his pockets were full of soldiers.' He indicated that he could stare down any conceivable opposition: he had received ample pledges of troops from several nobles. His campaign was planned to last several months, or into autumn, but as Machiavelli remarked in a letter from Forlì on 9 October, the Signoria might as well realize that if Julius handled it well it might 'lead the King of France, on whom [he] mainly relies, [to] be at liberty to defend the Church and to protect Italy against those who would devour her.'

With Florence's representative in tow, Julius's itinerary now led him from Perugia, on 27 September, through Fratta, Gubbio, Cesena, Forlì, Palazzolo and Imola. Earlier, and without a shot fired, he and his retinue had tramped their way into the lofty, ancient city of Perugia itself. Machiavelli was astonished as its gloomy, established ruler, Giampaolo Baglioni, a parricide and mass-murderer who enjoyed leaving piles of his enemies' bodies lying about in the streets, a one-time confederate of Cesare Borgia, thief and opportunistic slitter of throats, whose family had lorded it over the city's precincts for more than a century, surrendered his government and placed his castles, fortresses and hostages in papal hands. 'If he does no harm to the man who has come to take away his state,' Machiavelli reported, 'it will only be out of kindness and humanity.'¹²

Kindness had little to do with it. Julius's tempestuous person, lavish rhetorical skills and an uncanny ability to reconstruct lapsed alliances, plus the reviving majesty of the papacy, rapidly loosed apoplectic fears more than sufficient to permit him to achieve many of his goals. At the same time, Machiavelli's belief in an Italy assailed, or 'devoured,' rippling through his *First Decennale*, began to permeate his latest reports to the Signoria. Often a despairing outlook combined with gloomy convictions about the decisive role of *Fortuna* in human affairs.

In the days from 13 to 21 or perhaps 27 September, but at any rate during his stay in the city, he wrote a more than one-thousand-word-long disquisition (or *Ghiribizzi*, as it came to be called, or fantasies in the manner of speculations) on *Fortuna*, adapting several of his crystallizing ideas into the form of a letter that in the end he may not have sent. During this time he seems also have written a 192-line poem, the *Capitolo/di Fortuna*. The letter was addressed to Giovan

Battista Soderini (1484–1528), Piero's nephew. The poem, arranged in the *terza rima* manner that had by now become more or less his favourite in verse, he also dedicated to the twenty-two-year-old Giovan Battista.

The letter is remarkable for its resolution of an enigma – what after all is *Fortuna*? – in simple yet comprehensive terms, the poem for its rational vigour buttressed by techniques retooled from other authors. The series of allegorical, history-oriented paintings described in its last lines, for instance, owes much to Boccaccio's *Teseida*, the popular Arthurian and neo-classical Romance of knighthood, chivalry and courtly love on which Geoffrey Chaucer (1349–?1400) had based his celebrated 'Knight's Tale.'

The influence of the ancient Roman poet Statius (Publius Papinius, c.45–96) and the Spanish poet-philosopher Boethius can also be detected, if palely, in Machiavelli's animated images. Both the letter and poem, were, it seems, the result of intense personal disappointments. Indeed, he seems to have conceived them against a Perugian backdrop of dour, inspiring Etruscan stone ruins full of smooth blacks on blacks, and among delicious modern paintings that he probably would have seen in the government buildings and churches: Perugino's frescoes of the Transfiguration, the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Six Heroes of Antiquity had for some years been on display in one of the two Halls of the Merchants, just past the Palazzo Pubblico.

'My fate,' he writes in his letter to Gian Battista, but in a sceptical vein that by now begins to feel familiar, '[shows] me so many and such varied things that I am forced rarely to be surprised or to admit that I have not savoured, either through reading or through experience, the actions of men and their ways of doing things.'¹³ Citing two ancient generals, Hannibal and Scipio, the one 'cruel' and 'treacherous,' the other 'pious' and 'loyal,' he argues that they achieved 'identical results' among their hard-to-tame respective populations of Spain and Rome. Differing qualities seem to have made no difference to their accomplishments. The same might also be seen among the best and worst of men. Ethics, character and intelligence must count for nothing, he now remarks, a paradox that he finds excruciating, but that leads him to examine the controversial nature of *Fortuna* herself.

The fiercest of goddesses, as Machiavelli sees her, who presides over all human affairs, those of saints aside, should be understood as consisting of nothing but circumstances and people. These constantly change. They are also unpredictable. The human failure to keep up with the changes, however, or to adapt to them, which he sees as tricky in the short run and impossible in the

long – how can anyone constantly alter both his personality and methods? – produces human defeats and victories. One result is that the defeats and victories are not merely unpredictable but inevitable: ‘Because times and affairs often change, both in general and in particular, and because men change neither their imaginations nor their ways of doing things accordingly, it turns out that a man has good fortune at one time and bad fortune at another.’¹⁴ Beyond this fixity of human methods and habits, people are also ‘shortsighted’ and naïve, or ‘unwilling to master their own natures’: ‘it follows that [*Fortuna* seems] fickle, controlling men and keeping them under her yoke,’ when it is only shifting circumstances that sabotage human endeavours.

Despite this situation, from a political point of view all may not be lost: ‘cruelty, treachery and impiety are effective in providing a new ruler with prestige in that region where human kindness, loyalty and piety have long been common practice.’ The opposite will also apply to new rulers in areas where cruelty, treachery and impiety have reigned before. In the face of the relentless alterations of circumstances and people, political success can be achieved, but only by means of contradictory policies. Their success will have nothing to do with ethical considerations, however, as ethics are always irrelevant to success.¹⁵

His poem about *Fortuna* reveals a similar stress on facts. *Fortuna* ‘rules with fury’ [regni impetuosamente] and ‘often keeps the good beneath her feet; the wicked she raises up; and if ever she promises you anything, never does she keep her promise.’ *Fortuna* inhabits the bleakest of palaces. In its rooms, all greatness of spirit, or every humane impulse [Liberalità], ‘stands ragged and torn’ [stracciata e rotta] while Fraud and Usury gambol and disport themselves.¹⁶ Only the person capable of leaping from wheel to wheel among *Fortuna*’s changing events can hope to escape her tyranny, and even he or she will seldom be able to do so ‘because while you are whirled about by the rim of a wheel that is lucky and good, [*Fortuna*] is wont to reverse its course in mid-circle.’¹⁷

Thus it is that the secret force [occulta virtù] that rules us manages to defeat our greatest need, which is for flexibility, and so it also happens that *Fortuna*’s palace is everywhere decorated ‘with [historical] paintings of those triumphs from which she gets most honour,’ or works of art that recount the enslavement of the world’s peoples by hordes of grim oppressors: the Egyptians, Assyrians, Medes, Persians, Greeks and others. Only he or she lucky enough to die before *Fortuna*’s wheel whips round again, plunging him or her to the bottom, may appear to have beaten her at her savage game.

Scribbling away among Julius's military-religious entourage at Perugia, Machiavelli was surely aware of a familiar figure to whom many of his strictures about *Fortuna* might easily have applied: the charming, intelligent thirty-one-year-old Cardinal Giovanni de'Medici, brother of Giuliano, to whom he had addressed a few deferential poems in his mid-twenties, which Lorenzo de'Medici, now long dead, had collected in a book. Lorenzo's son Piero, who as a refugee had fled Florence with the Medici family, had died five years before, in December 1503, drowned in a boating accident on the river Garigliano while fighting for the French against the Spanish.¹⁸ Giovanni was now the custodian of the Medici legacy, along with their hostility to the Florentine Republic, and their desire, of which Machiavelli was also aware, someday to overthrow it and replace it with a government of their own.

The German Enigma

Among the competing German duchies, as to a lesser extent in France, militarism and culture seemed constantly at war. Their peculiar feud fired the personality of the loosely acknowledged ruler, in Germany's case that of the Holy Roman Emperor-to-Be, who had so far not been elected and whose empire seemed only invisibly to exist, King Maximilian I (1459–1519). It fired as well his fantasy of conquering Italy.

The famous portrait by Albrecht Dürer (plate XI) shows Maximilian about ten years later, or long after Machiavelli had been sent to Germany to meet and negotiate with him, greying amid shoulder-length locks, abstracted, attentive, dollops of melancholy probing his bony Roman nose. Maximilian was delicate and strong, or adrift between paradoxes. Speechless till the age of nine, he became the master of seven languages, among them French, English, Italian, Spanish and Latin. Crazy about hunting, he kept up the hunt long after his exhausted companions and the animals themselves tired of it and fled the forest. A light eater, he died after devouring a mass of melons.

A military innovator *à la* Machiavelli, who established the *Landsknechte*, or the first regular German infantry, in the Netherlands, he was often defeated in battle because of miscalculations of enemy troop strengths. Sympathetic to a fault, he was often poor and spent a lot of time borrowing money. A good marksman, he often ran away from his enemies (Machiavelli reports on his cowardice before the Venetians¹).

Stories about Maximilian's evasive, aggressive, cash-strapped behaviour helped shape the Faust legend, and even the *Faustbuch* (1587), source of Christopher Marlowe's Elizabethan play. Indecisive, as when he set out to invade Italy and then changed his mind, he vacillated on other occasions, as when he allowed the French Charles VIII to abduct his intended bride, Anne of Brittany, and marry her himself.² From early 1507, the nine members of the

Florentine Signoria had (perhaps therefore) grown increasingly worried about Maximilian's plans for Italy.

The French-German rivalry kept yanking the Republic in opposite directions. Leading members of government fretted lest a French incursion in April, which had involved seizing Genoa, might not intensify Maximilian's desire to force the French, Florence's frequent protector, out of Italy altogether. This move might assist his sought-after election as Holy Roman Emperor. It could unite the vast, diffuse Holy Roman Empire. Florentine apprehensions increased as Maximilian convened a diet in Constance, where he pressurized numerous German princes into supplying money and troops for an Italian invasion making a beeline for Rome.³

The Florentine quandary – what to do about the German danger – at first led Soderini to propose sending Machiavelli, as ever his own man, to Maximilian's court to evaluate the King's intentions and military capabilities. In the process he would gather intelligence on German resources. These remained unknown. Soderini's proposal was rejected by members of the Signoria, however, and others on the Grand Council, jealous of Machiavelli's, or a mere secretary's, influence as well as suspicious of Soderini himself.

A compromise was agreed – the Ten would have preferred sending Alamanno Salviati and Piero Guicciardini – with the selection as ambassador of Francesco Vettori (1474–1539). His *ottimati* family, with its imposing *palazzo* in the Santo Spirito district not far from the Machiavelli and the Guicciardini *palazzi*, and his family's commitment to a humanist education of their sons, had the right credentials for delicate diplomatic assignments. Vettori set out in June 1507, at the same time as a meeting of the French and Spanish Kings at Savona, not far from French-controlled Genoa. Each King was eager to proclaim his friendship for the other in the face of the German threat.

Machiavelli eventually found himself also put to use, but in August, as Soderini dispatched him to Siena. Here his assignment was to confer with the Pope's legate, Cardinal Bernadino Carvajal of Santa Croce, who was likewise making his uncertain way towards Maximilian's court in the wake of disturbing news that some of the princes attending his diet in Constance had accepted his plans for an Italian invasion.

Every possible manoeuvre would now be set in motion to deter the King, including promoting an arrangement whereby he could be crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Germany instead of Italy, and flattery, with the designation of the Pope's 'Legate [as Machiavelli wrote back] [having the task of distracting]

the Emperor with the assurances of the high opinion which his Holiness the Pope entertains of his Majesty.’

The Sieneese, who were themselves apprehensive of Germany, showered Julius’ emissary with presents for his journey, their hopes rising on the slightest indication of papal support: ‘two skinned and dressed calves, six skinned and dressed sheep, 13 sacks of grain, ... 12 barrels of wine, nine barrels of fowls (six pairs each), four barrels of young geese (six pairs each), ... 14 dishes of seafish, 12 pairs of white wax torches, ... [and] 24 marchpanes [or fruit-cakes].’ Luxuries complemented their dreams of German restraint.⁴ It is unknown whether these gifts eased the Cardinal’s rocky, snowy path into the Swiss-German north. As it became evident that his exertions would be insufficient to forestall an invasion, Machiavelli was also sent on to Germany, on 25 December. Riding via Constance in a last ditch effort to see whether mere money, or a 50,000-ducats bribe – actually a payoff – might settle the fears of the Signoria, he spent two isolated weeks hurrying through forests whose darkness seemed unrelieved.

The long ride was taxing, and the point of it questionable, as often since the start of his diplomatic career. By the time he arrived in Botzen in the Tyrolean Alps on 11 January, he had already spent the 110 ducats allotted for his trip by the Signoria. To his relief, he found Vettori living in luxury at the German court.

Beyond this attractive fact, and because some princes had refused to commit themselves to the King’s Italian campaign, and with the Swiss unhappy about going to war with France (they eventually dispatched 6,000 troops to assist the French), the prospect of avoiding an invasion seemed at least alive. ‘You want to [find out] in two hours,’ Machiavelli was told over dinner by one Monsignore de Disviri, an ambassador of the Duke of Savoy, ‘what I have not been able to learn in many months.’ Disviri noted the Emperor’s obsession with keeping his invasion cards close to his chest: ‘This nation is very discreet, and the Emperor observes the greatest secrecy in everything he does; if he but changes his lodgings, he sends his cook only after he has himself been for an hour on the way, so that no one may know where he is going.’⁵

The fluid situation might still have its advantages as it offered Machiavelli time to delve into the habits of the Swiss and the Germans. Some bits of what he learned were military (‘there must be some four thousand infantry and a thousand horse fit for service’), others diplomatic, still others cultural and political. He entertained the Signoria with his detailed account of the political organization of the Swiss into cantons, a distributive system of shared power not readily understood in more reserved Italian political circles. He transmitted his

discoveries in long communiqués, whose writing he shared with Vettori, even to alternating paragraphs as the two began to become friends.

His sweeping insights into Germany-*cum*-Austria, moreover, indicated a growing, almost encyclopedic desire to analyse unfamiliar societies. He stayed at Maximilian's court for over six months, or until mid-June. After returning to Florence, he wrote up a 'Second Report on the Affairs of Germany.' Its aim was to offer his colleagues a reliable summary of the attitudes and customs typical of their likely northern enemies:

The Germans are rich ... because they live as if they were poor; for they neither build, nor dress, nor furnish their houses expensively. It is enough for them to have plenty of bread and meat, and to have a stove behind which they take refuge from the cold... . Everyone lives according to his rank No money leaves their country, as the people are content with what their country produces; and thus they enjoy their rough and free life, and will not enlist to go to war, unless they are overpaid.⁶

By now he had also picked up a great deal on the 'great wealth' of the Germans, or the sort of information important to evaluating their military efficiency, and on Maximilian's personal wealth, which he felt 'free to use as he pleases,' as in going to war: 'The power of Germany cannot be doubted by anyone, for she has abundant population, wealth and armies.' German frugality, he observed, if combined with the country's abundant stocks of weapons and formidable quantities of troops regularly trained and exercised, must keep the King's readiness for battle at a high pitch. A significant number of so-called German 'free cities,' however, could confront the King with a tactical problem. They might offer tacit support to Florence's desire for peace: the ambitions of the German free cities centred less on conquest than on preserving commercial relations, which yielded them sizeable profits from their trade with Italy.⁷

Remarkably, Machiavelli produced each of his reports on the basis of the skimpiest acquaintanceship with German-speaking peoples. At most he had visited a few Swiss and German towns. His claims seem entirely sound, however, a quality probably due to his having read, if not pored over, Caesar and Tacitus, whose historical and social accounts, acting as models, even to influencing his style, lay in providing him with a suave, almost surgical manner of arriving at tenable social generalizations by showing him how to cut away everything superfluous. The Roman approach he naturally combined with

his own intuitions, tested against meetings with diplomats, other officials and non-government people, and his trained empirical principles. Together, they let him obtain a thorough cultural understanding, often on the basis of mere shreds of evidence.

Nor, as the German invasion clouds closed in, could it fairly have been said that his and Vettori's bargaining with Maximilian was useless. At first, their negotiations served as a bare bones means of delaying the execution of the King's plans. Later, once these plans were abandoned, the Florentines might have been seen as instrumental in their scuttling.

Machiavelli was authorized to appease Maximilian's territorial appetites with 50,000 ducats. These were to be paid in installments starting at 30,000, though the Signoria later raised the sum to 60,000.⁸ Ever evasive, however, the Emperor at first rejected the amount as trivial, but ran into problems as he failed to attract the strong German support that he needed from his diet at Constance. Worse, his poorly organized invasion – typical of his indecisiveness – led to victories, defeats and routs by the Venetians. In March 1508, for instance, lured into a valley 'in hopes of plunder,' some 'thirteen hundred of [his German] infantry, under [the] command of a reckless captain,' were attacked from above by a local population hurling stones, and next surrounded by 6,000 Venetian cavalry and infantry, who killed over a thousand of them.⁹

The King's military competence thus seemed scarcely a harbinger of success. Certainly it would never match the nimble brilliance of Cesare Borgia, who, as Machiavelli knew, had himself met with catastrophe just a year earlier. Cesare had skidded from freedom into disaster. After a few Castilian noblemen finally abetted his escape from Medina del Campo in 1506, he rushed off to Navarre. There he appeared to many who recalled his ruthlessness as 'the devil' incarnate. He had nourished hopes of reclaiming his privileges under Louis XII, but now discovered that his French estates had been expropriated and that his stolen money, invested with Genoese bankers, had itself been stolen at the behest of Pope Julius.

As was his wont, he overreached himself, though Machiavelli's admiration of his insights into the duplicity of princely life remained unaffected. Galloping ahead of a body of troops handed over to him on 11 March 1507, he seized the town of Larraga and then dashed into a follow-up battle before the castle at Viana, which he tried to seize as well. Here he found himself isolated in a ravine. A couple of enemy cavalrymen, whom he had been pursuing, swung back on him, flung him from his horse and killed him. Extracted from his armour and

clothes, and castrated, his naked body was left bleeding under a rock. News of Cesare's death threw his sister Lucrezia into an insane grief. She 'tortur[ed] herself with calling his name night and day.' Her life seemed, if not over, at least ruined, perhaps mostly because whatever her brother's misjudgements, and as if in a horrible contradiction of his amazing abilities, at the time of his death he was just thirty-one.¹⁰

Maximilian's Italian campaign, by comparison, ended at least for the moment on a purely embarrassing note: a three-year truce that he felt forced into signing with the Venetians, in June 1508. For Machiavelli the German reversal, which proved temporary, had come none too soon. In May, according to Vettori, he 'met with an accident [to his health].' It seemed 'serious' and may have been gallstones, though in the terminology of the day, as Vettori observed, it was described as 'gross humours in the blood.' Machiavelli's 'malady,' as he himself put it, forced his return to Florence for medical treatment.¹¹

Victory at Pisa

The deep winter of the next year, or just nine months later, discovered him on the verge of what looked like his greatest professional triumph. At first it did not seem that way. Now fully recovered and acting as chancellor of the Nine, he had been asked to take command of the citizen militia during the previous summer. He had deftly used it in attacks on Pisan farms, houses and soldiers, right up to the damaged walls of Pisa itself. These new assaults had the blessing of the Signoria and a Florentine population eager as never before to put an end to the long rebellion and its draining of the Republic's wealth. His campaign had begun on 21 August, as he mustered out battalions of enlisted men from San Miniato and Pescia.

He had showed no hesitation about accompanying his men on their daily raids, in setting up ambushes and even joining the fighting, as indicated by a curt note of 20 February from his encampment beside a mill at Quosi, on the Arno just below Pisa: 'We are here ... to watch whether any new convoy of boats is attempting to come in [to relieve the city], and to prevent it, as we have done the others.'¹

His strategy was deliberately provocative. Its aim was further to isolate the tower-dominated city by cutting it off from efforts by ship to break what was becoming a vice-like Florentine siege. This involved hundreds of troops, and hammering into the river-bed brass-joined, brass-supported wooden piles to form a palisade. The plan moved efficiently ahead, and its success was decisive. If the King of France objected to so harsh a method, as he saw it, of carrying on the war, or openly attempting to starve the Pisans into submission, they themselves soon perceived the pointlessness in continuing.

Acts of barbarism implicated the populations on both sides. On 20 January, Florence signed a three-year pact with Lucca, denying Pisa any assistance. In April, the Republic's troops captured sixty horses, along with a group of men attempting to smuggle Luccan corn at the Pisan gates. Sixty were killed, but

fifty-four, taken prisoner and bound by a rope, were dragged back to Florence and paraded before a rejoicing crowd.²

In April also, a false Pisan peace offer led to an ambush of Republican soldiers at the city walls. A score or more were slaughtered by cannon fire. Captured Pisan troops held in Florence's *Stinche* prison were shown off in the public stocks 'because we heard the Pisans had done the same to ours.' Pisan protests of peaceful intentions, and repeated proposals to negotiate, were met with suspicion.

In March, Machiavelli immersed himself in this back-and-forth war-peace routine as the Pisans applied to Jacopo d'Appiano of Piombino, his acquaintance from early negotiating days, to represent them. The blockade was already producing dire effects. Ever dubious, the Ten of War ordered Machiavelli out of his camp at Pisa to Piombino to meet Jacopo and other Pisan representatives, but with discouraging results: 'I left ... camp on Monday, and arrived here at Piombino yesterday, ... and half an hour later I called upon his Lordship.' Jacopo introduced him to the Pisans, but Machiavelli soon realized that their idea of a settlement was no more than a joke: '[The Signoria, they proposed,] should leave them all within the walls of Pisa, and take for [them]selves all the remainder of their dominion; ... they [said that they] considered it a great gift for [the Signoria] to obtain a just title to so much as [they] had never possessed before.'

He found their announcement an insulting waste of his time. He told them so, told Jacopo that he was being made fun of ('It must be evident to your Lordship that these gentlemen are merely laughing at you') and returned to his camp and men, or to what in some ways had become a personal war.³ In April the Signoria expressed anxiety about his safety. They tried to convince him to accept reassignment, but he replied, 'I am aware that [a] post [at Cascina] would expose me to less danger and fatigue, but if I wanted to avoid danger and fatigue I should not have left Florence.'

His eagerness to see the war through had become unshakable: 'Here I can make myself useful, but [there] I should not be good for anything, and should die of sheer desperation.'⁴ His reply was sent from the camp at Mezzana, but the needs of command now saw him shift from camp to camp – there were three – each crowded and open to the winds, if made lively at night by soldiers singing among their tent-lined alleys. He organized the arrival of new troops in their hundreds, called strategy sessions, prepared counter-attacks against skirmishes and did his best to pay the men on time and resupply them, mostly via 'the

[local] government shops' controlling the 'sale of bread.' Shortages provoked riots. Loaves came from the nearby commune of Val di Nievole, but as he told the Signoria in May, 'I have myself experienced the way these communes act, sending large [quantities] one day and nothing the next.'

On 20 May, however, an improvement seemed to drop out of the blue. Four Pisan emissaries, who seemed earnest enough about peace, rode into the camp at Val Serchio. Their arrival led the three Commissioners General there to report that 'our discussion was pretty long, and ... it may well be that, whether they come here or proceed to Florence to settle the details, a satisfactory result will be reached.' The fifteen-year-old war, with its unpredictable battles, might be tilting towards an end after all, and in a manner welcome to the Republic. A few days later, on 1 June, the 'country people,' or farmers living near the city, also sued for peace: 'We learn,' wrote the Commissioners, 'that they really cannot hold out any longer, and if the hope of peace were extinguished, one half of the inhabitants of Pisa would die of hunger.'⁵

A truce now seemed likely, and travelling with a few Pisan representatives, as he was bidden, and under guard, Machiavelli left for Florence. On 4 June he joined an assembly of officials for the signing of Pisan articles of surrender, placing his name just below that of the Republic's First Secretary, Marcello Virgilio. As he did so, and in the presence of the Republic's Ten of War, a dove, at once taken by many as prophetic of better days to come, flew in through an open door of the Palazzo della Signoria, where everyone had gathered. It fluttered about their heads.

This happened at ten in the morning, and 'as if by a miracle,' or so Landucci recalled, it frisked 'all round the [interior] court ... and dashing against the wall, fell at [their] feet... . [Their] *Proposto* [foreman] picked it up but could not hold it, only some feathers remaining in his hand. [It] was thought a good omen, especially as it was at this hour that the Pisans had ratified the agreement – a sign that it was reality, and that an end had been put to so much evil.'⁶

The dove might have been taken as miraculous for another reason, that it reminded them of the mechanical doves, 'symbolic of the Holy Spirit,' which on the Saturday of Passion Week and ever since the twelfth century had flown on wires running across the Carroccio to the Cantonata dei Pazzi and at the *Duomo*. Anyone aware of how Florence celebrated Easter might well have thought that the city had entered a blessed moment.

On that Friday too, or 8 June, in the company of the three Florentine commissioners, plus a thousand men selected from his own battalions, Machiavelli

watched as the Pisan gates were flung open, and actually entered the city. The war was over. The previous days had in fact seen it dissolve into the topsy-turvy confusion not unusual at the end of many wars. Sides seemed switched about as the defeated pushed into the camps of their conquerors, seeking relief from their hunger and offering the hand of friendship.

Along the streets, work on rebuilding the bombarded walls, houses, *piazze* and towers had already begun. Shops reopened. In Florence, even if he was not present and not officially lauded, Machiavelli was congratulated, along with other leaders, on what everyone took to be a solid military success:

It is not possible to express how much delight, how much jubilation and joy [Agostino Vespucci wrote him on 8 June], all the people here have taken in the news of the recovery of that city of Pisa; in some measure every man has gone mad with exultation; there are bonfires all over the city, though it is not yet three in the afternoon... . *If I did not think it would make you too proud, I should dare say that you with your battalions accomplished so much good work that, not by delaying but by speeding up, you restored the affairs of Florence.*⁷

Unofficial appreciations of Machiavelli's part in the Pisan victory were touted everywhere. As one of the commissioners at Pisa, Filippo Casavecchia, a friend and colleague, wrote to him on 17 June, 'I wish you a thousand benefits from the acquisition of that noble city [Pisa], for truly it can be said that your person was cause of it to a very great extent.' Filippo had been one of the first to appreciate the importance to the victory of Machiavelli's citizen militia: 'Every day I discover you to be a greater prophet than the Hebrews or any other nation ever had.' He added that his own time might now best be spent in a spot of fishing near his home in Barga: 'I am saving you a ditch full of trout and a wine [such as] you never tasted... . [A] fishing party is arranged for the end of the month, more or less, whenever you come.' Filippo's insistence on a country vacation coupled with fishing surely caught Machiavelli's eye: 'Please, Niccolò, come quickly and send me or rather write me a couple of lines about where you are.'⁸

Apparently he did so, and over the next five months, or till 10 November, when he was again sent out on a mission, but now to Mantua with 10,000 ducats to pay Maximilian for abandoning any temptation to interfere in the Pisan surrender, he stayed in Florence, where he returned to more mundane office

work. Perhaps it was now, or as the hush of peace descended on an optimistic diplomatic moment, and as the Venetians languished in semi-idle weakness, that he turned to a more frivolous pursuit. It is not known just when he produced his satirical piece of fluff, 'Rules for an Elegant Social Circle.' It is likely that he wrote it during these months (a reference in it to Michelangelo's *David* sets its composition to at least after 1504).

What also seems clear is that even as momentous battles erupted across northern Italy, in some broad sense the international mood had grown more receptive to satire. Across prosperous stretches of western, northern and central Europe – and detectably so in Italy – a fresh stew of scepticism, mischief and jokiness, of punning and even publishing catalogues of ironic obscenities, was coming to a boil. One inspiration for this shift in taste lay in the career of the humanist Italian scholar-writer Poggio Bracciolini, discoverer of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. Some thirty years earlier, in 1474, he had brought out a scruffy, scatological prose collection, the *Facetiae*, a gaggle of rollicking tales and anecdotes that he had turned into a jest book.

The *Facetiae* was widely imitated. It influenced the unknown author of the tales of Till Eulenspiegel [or Owlglass], the unprincipled, free-seeming German rogue whose wanderings and adventures were compiled in 1500 at the liberal press of Johannes Grüninger of Strasbourg. Their appearance, perhaps in 1508, in a book packed with woodcuts by Hans Baldung-Grien, one of Albrecht Dürer's most brilliant pupils, and other good artists, led Eulenspiegel to begin to establish himself in his amazing career as Germany's most famous (or notorious) folk anti-hero, a success which continues into the present century through almost four hundred editions in dozens of languages.⁹

In France, François Rabelais (1490–1553) was then twenty; in England, Thomas More (1478–1535) thirty-one. Neither had yet delighted his world with the uproarious pages that would soon make his reputation. As Machiavelli's 'Rules' with its wry insults implies, however, a novel satirical spirit of defiance and social criticism had begun to wash over a number of European societies. The 'Rules' nonetheless scarcely represents Machiavelli's best work: delicate, cagey and experimental, it is perhaps most accurately understood as exposing the hypocrisy of an upper-crust Florentine world along with the cruelties twisting beneath it.

As he also implies, the 'Rules' is pure entertainment: 'A circle of ladies and gentlemen' (he starts off) '[gathers] for soirées where they often [do] amusing things, but often dull things as well.' The 'elegant' circle's passion for pleasure

requires discipline, if not regulation, which a single 'quick-witted' member – Machiavelli himself – plans to provide.¹⁰

Anyone disobeying his rules will pay the piper, or so his modest proposal intimates, while the rules themselves were meant to expose the dishonesty of the circle, to wit: 'Any gentleman or lady who does not within a day broadcast everything said or done at one of the soirées will be punished in the following manner: A lady transgressor will have her slippers nailed in a prominent place for all to see, with a note bearing her name [and presumably revealing her foot-stains]; a gentleman transgressor will find his hose hung prominently inside out for all to see.' The hint at excremental stains instances an early literary use of excrement as a satirical weapon, a device later deployed in the 'shittier' tales of Till Eulenspiegel, and later still in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and his *Wonderful Wonder of Wonders, or An Accurate Description of the Birth, Education, Manner of Living, Religion, Politics, Learning, etc. of Mine A-se* (1720).

As with any satire worth its salt, the 'Rules' pulls no punches. It moves tartly from irony into ridicule into contempt amid dashes of excrement and nausea. What is unclear, and probably should not be assumed, is that the author saw his larger social world as moving along the same path.

A Government Overthrown

Seldom had the fortunes of Soderini, Machiavelli and the Republic looked so prosperous. Pisa's reabsorption into Republican territory stimulated public confidence. The defeat of Venice back in May by the League of Cambrai, which had been formed in the spring of 1509 between the French King and the German Maximilian, and later, reluctantly, the Vatican, bolstered a broad conviction, at least in the Grand Council (Soderini almost alone remained sceptical), that any threat to the Republic's security could for the moment be dismissed.¹

Florence still counted on Louis XII for protection. Relations between the French King and the Pope, as between Florence and the Pope, continued amiable. If Maximilian, a late-comer to the Venetian-Pisan defeat, had to be paid off at the insistence of the nervous French to the tune of an extravagant 40,000 ducats, the second installment of which, or some 10,000, would come due in Mantua in November, Machiavelli could deliver it himself. He could also use the journey, which the Signoria asked him to extend to Verona, as an opportunity to gather intelligence on the ability of the Venetians to restart the war.

The Venetian chances seemed minimal, or at least uncertain. From the Florentine point of view they felt unthreatening. Few in Florence seem to have paid much attention to another uncertainty, which might have seemed less inconsequential: the ambition of Giovanni de' Medici to overthrow Soderini and the Republican government and restore his family to power. Ever the playboy in cardinal's robes, despite his respectable classical education, he had perfected the reckless manners, sly aggressiveness and corpulence of a fop indifferent to power. Often he allowed himself to appear interested mostly in food, sex, jokes and clothes. His conspiratorial intentions, however, humming a bit like the malarial mosquitoes of Tuscany in his peaceful-seeming brain, might still have been worth noticing.

In late November Machiavelli delivered the Republic's ducats intended as a payment to Maximilian's agent in Mantua. By the twenty-second, he had reached Verona,² where he took note of the hostility of citizens astonished at the Venetian defeat: 'the citizens and the populace are altogether [pro-]Venetian'. He submitted a report on Verona's garrison and additional troops ('the garrison consists of German infantry' – not more than a thousand men – as well as Spanish, Italian, Burgundian and French cavalry and foot-soldiers), and picked up information on Venetian units roaming and pillaging not far from the city: '[their] soldiers ... are occupying themselves with plundering and ravaging the country around, and we see and hear daily of the most unexampled and extraordinary things, so that the minds of the country people are filled with a desire for death and vengeance.'³

These professional duties completed, he whiled away his autumn hours 'dream[ing] up diatribes that I write to the Ten' and 'having a good time.' Often he seemed to drift into nonsense: 'I have no letter to the [E]mperor, so ... I might be arrested as a spy.' By 8 December he had begun to make up nonsense, or to compose and send off to Francesco Guicciardini's brother, Luigi (1478–1551), the future politician and historian, a fantasy letter amounting to a minor satirical masterpiece. Certainly it seemed a foray in prose far more complex than his earlier 'Rules.' On the surface, it describes his encounter in Verona with a prostitute a few days before, or so he says. An impression of ulterior motives, however, hovers over the letter from its first disarming phrases: 'Hell's bells, Luigi, see how Fortune hands out to mankind different results under similar circumstances.'⁴ This idea sounds familiar, if not identical to the theme of his earlier letter on *Fortuna* to Soderini's nephew, though he is writing in response to a playful note (since lost) of Luigi's, in which he revels in his enthusiasm for 'fucking' again a woman whom he has just 'fucked': 'Why you had hardly finished fucking your woman before you wanted another fuck, and you wanted to take another turn at it.'

Machiavelli's response to Luigi's challenge veers off unexpectedly, however, into a plot, characters (including himself) and a journalistically sensational or at least questionable story, combined with scoops of rich, suspicious atmospherics and exaggerated language. The implication is that some preposterous, teasing game must be afoot:

But as for me, why I had been here three days, losing my determination because of conjugal famine, when I came across an old woman who launders my shirts; the house

she lives in is more than half underground; the only light you see in it enters through the door.⁵

Implausibly, or so he hints, he was led into what seemed a shabby, cave-like stage set – what else could this odd place be? – where his ‘laundress’ offered to show him a shirt that she hoped he would buy:

So, naïve prick that I am, I believed her and went in; once inside, I made out in the gloom a woman cowering in a corner affecting modesty with a towel half over her head and face. The old slut took me by the hand and led me over to her, saying, ‘This is the shirt that I wanted to sell you, but I’d like you to try it on first and pay me afterwards.’

His reaction to her brazen invitation, especially as the ‘old bawd’ quickly abandoned him, was one of ‘terror.’ He plunged in anyway, though, or forged lustily ahead, even as he found the ‘shirt’s’ ‘thighs flabby and her cunt damp ... her breath stank a bit.’ Frustration rankled against his awareness of the nightmarish circumstances and the dinginess of the encounter. Any reader half as alert as the educated Luigi, moreover, will surely have sensed by this time a developing tone of self-mockery.

If it seems a bit too early to spot the parody implicit in the underground room’s darkness, in which the ‘only light’ came in at the door, which was closed, a fine mist of eeriness and the enforced urgency suffusing his startled feelings may signal the meaning of an absurd-seeming mystery in which he found himself having sex with an unknown, invisible woman: that in some unclear if allegorical way he had stumbled into a perverse sexual version of Plato’s philosophical cave, in which what is real cannot be seen except as a set of shadows reflected on a wall.

Here too may be why, once he was done with her, he at once seized the initiative, though his grim-hollow mood, or silent jeering – but at whom, or what? – enveloped his as well as the reader’s descent into what may by now be understood as an ironic, fulsome horror:

Feeling like taking a look at the merchandise, I took a piece of burning wood and lit a lamp that was above it; but the light was hardly lit before it almost fell out of my hands. Ugh! I nearly dropped dead on the spot, that woman was so ugly.⁶

Too ugly to be real, one may well imagine, except as a quasi-literary figure laddled out of some soupy myth or folktale: too ugly as well, amid the torrent of

sordid details that he now dishes out about her, to be less than satirically nauseating: ‘a tuft of hair, part white, part black, ... although the crown of her head was bald (thanks to the baldness one could make out a few lice promenading about)’; ‘in the centre of her tiny, wrinkled head ... a fiery scar’; ‘at the end of each eyebrow ... a nosegay of nits’; ‘one eye looked up, the other down, and one was larger than the other.’

She had ‘no eyelashes,’ and a ‘turned-up nose stuck low down on her head’ – in the style, one notices, of some *papier mâché* jester’s face leering through the crowd on a Florentine festival day, or some Pinocchio-type slaloming past at a masquerade ball – even as ‘one of her nostrils was sliced open and full of snot.’

His excursion into a realm of exaggeration and grotesque parody seems more than a little accented by the group of well-known folktale motifs that cluster about her and the roles she plays: that of the old lover taken for young, of the deceptive seductress and (though the wrong way round) of the loathly hag transformed, as in Chaucer’s ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale’. Even his story-telling technique, with its obscene reversals, imitates Poggio in his *Facetiae*, Boccaccio in the *Decameron* and Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses* (or *The Golden Ass*), and perhaps most tellingly Apuleius’s recasting of an ancient Roman folktale in which an old witch is taken for a young wife.⁷

Echoes of Juvenal’s second-century Roman satires, linking sex with vomit, ripple through what follows as he builds to an hilarious, horrible dénouement:

Her mouth resembled Lorenzo de’Medici’s [he seems unable to resist political caricature amid the sexual frippery], but it was twisted to one side, and from that side drool was oozing, because, since she was toothless, she could not hold back her saliva... . As soon as she opened her mouth, she exuded such a stench on her breath that my eyes and nose, twin portals to the most delicate of the senses, felt assaulted by this stench and my stomach became so indignant that it was unable to tolerate this outrage: it started to rebel, then it did rebel, so that I threw up all over her.⁸

His hapless gushing, or perhaps taunted baptismal dousing, completes what, it may by now be agreed, becomes a voluptuous tour de force, even as it reveals that the whole disease-shot story, which at first seems aimed at Luigi, is directed past his friend and at himself.

Few doubts may seem to persist, in other words, that the target of all his vituperative nonsense is not some disfigured female effigy, or fictional ‘shirt,’ or even a Pandora’s box chamber of Platonic darkness, but his own propensity for

sexual self-delusion, and beyond it, the glamorizing ruin of fantasies that often accompany all sorts of sexual appetites. A frivolous fuss in a false Platonic cave demolishes both his egotism and self-flattery.

Satire here also becomes something new. In the strong sense, Machiavelli reinvents its methods, redesigning it not so much as a super-enlarged imitation of life as an indictment of the monstrous tendencies of self-deceptive, frustrated passions. These are allowed to shade into each other, and to rise into a soufflé of distortions unimpeded by actual experience, or into slapstick comedy based on inner terrors and compulsions. At the same time, the tale swivels under its slew of classical motifs. It acquires stature and impressiveness. His letter seems larded with a dark, mad grandeur. All these qualities may already have begun to recommend themselves as novel aids in the invention of literature, or the release of intense, modern self-consciousness.

Perhaps for this reason – that he has been watching himself call his own bluff – he feels entitled to round off the cheeky parable by remarking, ‘I shall stake my birth in heaven that as long as I am in Lombardy I’ll be damned if I think I shall get horny again,’ and ‘I no longer need fear experiencing so much disgust.’

Perhaps too it was no coincidence that his life itself now seemed rife with scandal. Over the previous several days, envy and ambition, whether focused on him and deflected, or nurtured in secret and brushed aside, had begun to worry some of his closest friends, who were zealous to protect him. A week or two before his adventure with the prostitute of darkness, or his invention of it, damaging rumours had begun to circulate about him in Florence. He had just composed and sent off to Luigi another scathing satirical piece, or as he self-deprecatingly describes it, a bit of ‘doggerel’ (*cantafavola*), a poem in terza rima of 187 lines (it has an extra line), *Dell’Ambizione* (On Ambition).

To consider this exciting if unfunny poem first, because it sets the stage for the more slanderous weather to come: it seems meant as a companion-piece to his poem *On Fortuna*. If the earlier poem (they are also similar in length) explores how changing people and circumstances may become a source of human failure and success, his *Dell’Ambizione* digs into a similar conundrum of rise and fall, but inwardly, or as a problem of the soul, and masterfully, with the drama more intimately framed:

Oh how many times, while the father holds his son tight in his arms, a single stab pierces the breasts of both!//Another abandons his ancestral home, accusing the cruel

and ungrateful gods, and with his children overwhelmed by sorrow.//Oh, strange events such as have never happened before in the world! Every day so many children are born by sword cuts to the womb.//To her daughter, trumped by sorrow, the mother says, 'For what miserable marriage, for what a cruel husband have I kept you!'//Filthy with blood are the ditches and streams, packed with heads, legs, arms, and other members gashed and severed.//Birds of prey, wild beasts, dogs have now become their family tombs – Oh tombs repulsive, terrible and unnatural! (ll 136–53)⁹

The odd springiness amid the tormented images enables them to leap beyond themselves into ghastly stylistic pleasures, or past morbidity into a poetry of shock. The pain described may be great, but its language streams with a serene control, or an accuracy untrammelled by abhorrence. Crimes are rendered not less horrible but more literary, which is to say more comprehensible amid accurate if disturbing metaphors.

Ambition itself is laid bare not so much as a personal drive as a force in the universe. It may be as old as Eden, the rebellion of Adam and Eve and the first murder – 'When man was born into the world, [Ambition and Avarice were born too]' – but it has been relocated to the human mind and heart.¹⁰ Minds, hearts and souls are seen as containing the protean, elemental powers of destruction and creation: they have become darkness and light, Shiva-like pulsations of angels and demons. Some can resist their seductions, but none their temptations. Even the holiest men and women may aspire to holiness, and so any aspiration, even to holiness, can be seen as secreting the poison of ambition and infecting the thoughts of the pious. Human desires are betrayed if not corroded from within.

As he worked on this poem, an unidentified masked man accompanied by 'two witnesses' visited the home of a notary of 'the Protectors of the Law,' or so Biagio Buonaccorsi wrote him from Florence on 28 December.¹¹ The man declared that as Machiavelli's father Bernardo had been disreputable – his offence was not specified – 'you can in no way exercise the office that you hold.' Bernardo's crime had perhaps been indebtedness – that he had been a *specchio* – a serious problem in the Republic: it would indeed have denied his son any chance to hold a civil appointment: whether inherited or not, indebtedness ranked as a disgrace in the eyes of the law.

Biagio was worried, though he seems to have been a jittery type anyway ('do not go off and assume that I am making the worst of things'). He guessed that

Machiavelli might laugh the whole thing off ('do not make fun of it and do not neglect it'). He was already trying to mitigate the possible legal consequences for his friend, and by association himself. 'The law is as favourable as can be,' he agreed, but 'the nature of the times' and the 'great number' of people gossiping about 'your case' ('your adversaries are numerous and will stop at nothing') proved that the whole shabby business had already become common public knowledge, and 'everywhere, even in the whorehouses.'

Faced with their possible 'ruin,' Biagio added, the best thing for the moment would be that he remain in Verona, 'and not return here for anything': the winds of libel were more likely to blow over 'if you are not here than if you are.'¹² In fact they blew over quickly, or at least Machiavelli was back in Florence by 2 January. The incident nonetheless reveals an aspect of his vulnerability just then, in which a wounded ghost from his past could tangle viciously with jealous hatred. Omens might have been divined in the unpleasant drama – Biagio thought he had spotted them – though they were to some extent glossed over.

Machiavelli had begun to stay away for months at a time in any case, at first on assignment to recruit new troops, including cavalry, and later to promote Florentine interests in France as a fresh spill of political darkness blotted the shifting military horizon.

At the moment, the most worrisome manipulator of armies, hostilities, pent-up ambitions and power was Julius II. His actions threatened the Republic's quasi-democratic future. Alliances subsided into betrayals. Anxiety displaced opportunities for organized policies. Despite his devotion to art, as exemplified by his encouraging Michelangelo and commissioning the Sistine Chapel, he remained adamant about satisfying the two ambitions dearest to him from his earliest days as Pope: the elimination of foreign troops from Italian soil, and an expansion of Church power.

The defeat of Venice, which he had taken in hand with Louis XII and Maximilian, seemed to provide a crowbar by which to gratify his yearnings: the Venetians themselves. With their strengths now adjustable to his touch – if cultivated, they might support his interests in decisive ways – he conceived a strategy which might enable him to pry loose from Italy both of his erstwhile allies, the French under Louis and the Germans under Maximilian, though inklings of his intentions would inevitably cause unease among the Florentines.

As ever, the Republic looked to a strong French presence in Italy as a safeguard against outside threats. As before too, the Signoria hoped that money

and flattery would prop up the flimsiest military arrangements. Machiavelli's third mission to the French court, therefore, which had by now moved back to Lyons and was set to move on to the cliff-high royal castle at Blois, had as its purpose the protection of the venerable Florentine-French connection. His journey to France in June 1510 was organized to reinforce it, preferably without weakening the Republic's equally important papal relationship.

Ominously, however, a pro-Medici faction in Florence, comprised of *ottimati* and other disaffected citizens, was becoming more restive. A group of semi-opportunists, they and their followers had never been exiled, only repressed. A quest of vengeance, reaching back to the Savonarolan revolution of more than a decade earlier and the expulsion of Piero de' Medici and his family, coincided with Julius's intentions. The upshot was that, within the city and without, sensitive political and military sore spots had become more tender. Irritating this condition, as Francesco Guicciardini was to observe a few years later, were the idiosyncrasies of the rulers themselves. If Maximilian seemed 'perplexed,' Julius seemed 'possessed of jealousy,' or embittered over the possibility that the German Emperor might manage to become 'Lord of Verona.'

Julius's best bet seemed to lie in stimulating the tacit hostility between the French and English under Henry VIII. To push his intentions forward, he invited the leading officials of Venice, including their ambassador, to the Vatican. In these holiest of surroundings he welcomed their prostration before him 'in [his] pontifical Chair near the Brazen Gate, ... [among] the Body of Cardinals and a great number of Prelates.' He absolved them of venal sins, lifted an interdict which had secured his triumph over them several months earlier, herded them back into the Church, and so ushered the entire Venetian governing class into abetting his power-seizing plans for northern Italy.¹³

By default Machiavelli became the Signoria's only representative in France. Given these complicated Vatican pirouettes, he could do little but watch as his mission turned into a juggling act of evasiveness and promises of Florentine financial assistance. It seemed doubtful whether the Republic could buy or fight its way out of this latest threat to its independence. A rumour had also begun to circulate that Julius was eager to return Giovanni de' Medici to Florence, thereby lopping off French support for the Republic. A pro-Medici, pro-Vatican faction within the city could prove more useful to his ambitions than a military assault.

Machiavelli arrived in Lyons on 7 July, in the wake of the death on 25 May of Cardinal Amboise, Archbishop of Rouen, who had been his sympathetic

contact in France during his previous missions. He called on the Cardinal's presumptive successor, General Florimond de Robertet, secretary to Kings Charles VIII and Louis and treasurer of France. He approached Robertet 'with all the ceremony and politeness due to so good a friend of our republic.'

Almost at once, too, Machiavelli met with the King, who expressed a need to 'know who are my friends and who are my enemies.' Persuading him of the Signoria's friendship lay at the heart his mission, but given the King's dread of Julius's anti-French motives, and his awareness of the Republic's desire to maintain good relations with Rome, he craved 'more positive assurance.' This over the next few days, and with the assistance of his colleagues in Florence, Machiavelli set out to provide. Nonetheless Louis's doubts remained unallayed. 'The Pope has struck a blow at me,' he reflected in early August, 'but I will bear all except the loss of honour and state.' Morosely, he added that 'if the Pope makes any demonstration of affection towards me, be it only the thickness of my fingernail, I will go the length of my arm to meet him.'¹⁴

Machiavelli had long believed that 'the character of the French is naturally suspicious' and that 'it is this that [has given] rise to their request [for assurance]': 'If war breaks out between the Pope and the Majesty of France,' he advised the Signoria, 'you will not be able to avoid declaring yourself in favour of one of the parties.' Louis, on the other hand, saw himself as a man of principle: 'The Emperor [Maximilian] ... urged me to divide Italy with him, but I have always refused ...; now, however, the Pope [may have obliged] me to do it.'

On 8 August Machiavelli rode into the countryside with Robertet, mulling over the prospects of war. He seems to have been aware that his personal life was increasingly, if sometimes reassuringly, infringing on his duties. An unknown correspondent in Florence, perhaps a copyist for Marcello Virgilio di Adriano Berti, kept him abreast of family news. Towards the end of August the correspondent wrote that 'your wife is here, and she is alive; your children are getting along, each in his own way.'

Machiavelli would have felt less happy about 'the meagre harvest at [his farm in Sant'Andrea in] Percussina,' and disappointed with the inept efforts by Florentine officials to recruit additional troops. He was surely put out by his correspondent's low estimate of the Republic's future: 'As for me, I think that in any case it will happen with the Pope and the Church as it happened with Venice, which pushed so hard that it got [into war and defeat].'¹⁵

On 24 August negotiations over Louis's 'assurances' were interrupted when he caught the flu-like ailment 'prevalent throughout the country.' Machiavelli

caught it himself, and also ran out of cash, for which he issued an immediate appeal. During those weeks, Julius's forces were constantly being strengthened, to this point with hundreds of lancers. He had decided to devote his attention to stirring up hostility between the French and the Spanish Kings. Machiavelli's interests pulled him in several directions, though his private life managed the odd sparkle here and there. He learned, for example, that his brother Totto was in Lecce, south of Brindisi, trading oil paintings for bolts of cloth, or making money. In Lyons he had also taken up with a courtesan, Jeanne, whom he knew from earlier missions. According to Giovanni Girolami, a friend and the agent of Francesco Soderini, her company was bound to ease any loneliness, as she was 'devoted to [him].'¹⁶

Throughout these months, scandal also seemed seldom to be a stranger. On 27 May, or two months earlier, he had become the victim of an anonymous accusation of sodomy. He was supposed to have engaged in it with a 'Curly-Haired Woman,' Lucrezia, or *La Riccia*, as she was called, a courtesan-friend over many years, perhaps from before his marriage.¹⁷ In the end the charge was dropped, but the merest hint of sexual illegality could well be dangerous. Throughout Europe what was notoriously referred to as 'the Florentine vice,' though understood as mostly involving young boys, merited the harshest punishment.

By January 1511, Julius's increasing appetite for conquest was crashing about in bizarre directions. Decorum meant little, safety less, recklessness all. The ignominy gathering about the leader of the Christian Church was as insignificant to him personally as it seemed shocking to everyone else. He regarded his insulted dignity as of no consequence, while scaling the walls of besieged towns with his troops, scrambling for lodgings amid artillery fire and laying plans for sieges, or snorting at the scud of a cannonball flying across the kitchen of the house where he was staying, just missing him. Battles seemed less important than whispers of his licentious behaviour with boys back in Rome. Martin Luther, who may have visited the city in 1510–11, bore questionable witness to his semi-secret sexual antics, which seven years later helped to inspire the Reformation.¹⁸

Machiavelli got back to Florence in October 1510. In France he had been replaced by Roberto Acciaiuoli, the Signoria's accredited ambassador. Both the Republic and the Pope now became helpless onlookers as the succeeding

months rose and crumpled into a tumult of councils, futile negotiations, duplicitous grins and violence. A conspiracy between Louis and Maximilian to replace Julius was humiliated by the Vatican armies. The forces of the Venetians and the Spanish chimed in. Most informed people realized that the Republic would inevitably be caught up in a war between the Pope and the French King.

The desperate need, far greater than before, for loyal Republican troops, along with better defences, was finally being recognized in Florence. During January and February 1511, Soderini dispatched Machiavelli to Pisa, Arezzo and Poggio Imperiale to recommend improvements to their fortifications. He spent part of March in the Valdichiana, where he recruited light if untrained cavalry units. In early spring he led them on parade at the Palazzo della Signoria.¹⁹ For Soderini himself, if not for the administration of the Republic, the political and military situation continued to drift and sink. He seemed to pay little attention to the several constricting shadows.

Whether from overconfidence or insensitivity, the lifetime standard bearer, or *Gonfaloniere*, had also become recklessly indifferent to the decline of his own popularity. This problem reached back over several years and matched a renewed esteem for the Medici, and especially for Cardinal Giovanni, who 'nourished and enhanced his reputation with great cunning.'

By August 1512, the frustrating combination of papal advances and retreats, French advances and retreats, and a build-up of Spanish troops allied with Julius and poised to take on the French by invading the Republic, had sapped Soderini's influence and inflamed an already unsettled atmosphere. Hostile troop movements centred about the town of Prato, only twelve miles from Florence. For some they intimated a strong possibility of changes in the Republic's constitutional governance. For others they seemed divinely inspired.

The role of bad weather as well as war ought probably not to be dismissed in evaluating the conditions of societies threatened by foreign troops and in conflict with themselves. Now as well as over the next few months, at any rate, a batch of frightful thunder- and hailstorms triggered alarms among the superstitious residents of Florence and Rome. For Landucci and others, these ominous celestial tea leaves had started settling at least since 24 August 1511, or just before and after the papal notice of excommunication issued against Florence by Pope Julius on 22 September, which prohibited so much as the holding of masses: 'We heard that there had been a terrible hailstorm at Crema in Lombardy, with meteoric stones of the weight of 150 pounds each, so that roofs were broken and many men and beasts killed... . At this time [4 September]

great fires were seen in the air, in the evening, at the castle of Carpi... . On the night following this date [4 November], two thunderbolts fell in Florence in the middle of the night, twisting 'a certain bronze band which was at the base of [Michelangelo's] "David"'²⁰

The natural disturbances – there were others – seemed to many to be linked to the 'cruelties' committed in or near the Republic by Spanish, French and papal soldiers: in Ravenna, which was sacked, in Volterra, which was also sacked ('a short time after a ... horned human monster had been born there') and in the Romagna, where the Spanish were 'plundered' by the French. In August 1512 a hailstorm shedding ice balls 'as large as eggs' thudded across Rome, turning day to night, killing livestock and shattering holy statues.

By now too the peasant population in the neighbourhood of Prato had been forced to flee before the Spanish advance. The roads and the 'whole of the plain' were choked with lines of refugee-carts 'more than a mile long,' in search of safety past the outer gates. 'Poor women and children,' Landucci wrote, could be seen 'laden with their scanty possessions; anyone who saw them could not help feeling moved and forced to weep.'²¹

It seems unlikely that in August 1512 Soderini delivered the dramatic speech to the Grand Council that Guicciardini later attributed to him. Inventing the right speech had long been a prerogative of historians. It also seems clear that he must have said something like it. Pleading that the Spanish demand for him to give up his office hardly represented their true intentions, that he was of no importance and that the Republic was threatened, he argued (according to Guicciardini) that 'I have always been prepared to risk my life for your benefit [or that of the several thousand in his audience], and that it would be much easier to renounce the magistracy which you have given me, and so free myself from the troubles and dangers of war.' He urged his fellow citizens to 'deliberate wisely' and 'attend to the preservation and defence of [their] liberty.'²² However he may actually have phrased it, his appeal led to an agreement among a majority, passionate about preserving popular government, that he stay on. It was combined with a compromise resolution inviting the Medici back, but only 'as private citizens.'

Encouragingly, and with Machiavelli's assistance, Florence had by now raised over 17,000 local troops. Three to four thousand were posted to Prato, the objective of the local Spanish commander, Raimondo da Cardona. The Viceroy, so-called, had at his own disposal just five thousand infantry and two

small cannon. The Florentine hope was that since his army was operating at near starvation levels, and with its ineffectual artillery unlikely to let it force its way into Prato's crowded, well-armed, walled-in streets – the town was an elegant place, renowned as the birthplace of Fra Lippo Lippi – a truce would be concluded, with scores of lives saved.

This might well have happened – most people expected it as sensible – had Soderini not acted with a self-wounding irrationality. Responding with what Guicciardini terms his customary 'timidity,' or some belief that the Spanish would pull back in the face of more or less equal numbers, he did nothing. His inaction, on the early afternoon of 29 August, with both sides expecting a signal to negotiate, provoked the Spanish into an attack against all odds on Prato itself.

Moving his cannon to higher, commanding ground, and despite one of them blowing apart on his first volley, Raimondo punched a hole twelve cubits wide through the wall and close to a turret. Through this opening and using scaling ladders, his soldiers climbed and then dashed into Prato's streets, killing the two men left on guard at the turret. Their deaths, which seemed even more terrifying because no one anticipated them, wiped out every shred of morale among the defending troops, who in their inexperience simply took fright and ran off. What followed was a grisly triumph of hunger and brutality over cowardice – greatly to the astonishment of the Spanish – and with tragic consequences for the Republic.

The extent of the carnage that ensued is still unclear: in a letter of 16 September to an unknown noblewoman, possibly Isabella d'Este, Machiavelli put it at four thousand dead, Landucci at five thousand, Bartolomeo Cerretani (a contemporary historian) at 4,500. The horrors certainly exceeded the numbers.

As the Republic's volunteers threw down their weapons and bolted for the nearby houses, two thousand women and children rushed into the cathedral. There they would surely have been hacked and beaten to death by the Spanish pikes, axes, short swords and knives, had not Cardinal de'Medici, who came riding in with Raimondo's army, ordered his own troops to guard the various church entrances and so saved them. Thousands of others, mostly men, were nonetheless cut down in the streets. A barbaric impulse had clearly been unleashed. The rich were kidnapped and held for ransom. The poor were murdered and dismembered. The desolate region round about Prato's walls rang out at night with the shrieks of the doomed as their trashed and fired homes brightened the echoing sky.²³

The effects of the massacre on the citizens of Florence were deep and conclusive. Landucci saw the town's immolation as the result of 'our sins.' Ambassadors were quickly sent out to bargain with Raimondo, and accepted his demand for a 60,000-ducat ransom, plus Soderini's removal from office, followed by his house arrest, and the return of the Medici. A smothering terror, immobilising and silencing a Florentine population unused to taking responsibility for its own defence, or even to putting up a struggle on its own behalf, left many citizens and others the 'easy prey of anyone who wished to oppress them.' The Republic's leaders themselves seemed paralysed.

Over the next few days Machiavelli spent pointless hours with Soderini, trying to arrive at a face-saving solution, but despite their efforts papers surrendering the city were signed on 30 August. The Florentine soldiers protecting the Palazzo della Signoria were withdrawn, and scores of prisoners loyal to the Medici were released from the Stinche prison, located on what is today the site of the modern Teatro Verdi, between the Via del Fosso and the Via Ghibellina. Crowds of Medici supporters, swarming in 'a tumultuous uprising all over,' found weapons and seized the Palazzo.

Soderini, surprised and trapped in his spacious offices, dispatched Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, still in charge of the Republic's forces, to arrange his escape. This was arranged, and after the pro-Medici crowd had been persuaded not to attack him, but hemmed in by enraged enemies anyway, he hurried over to Vettori's house. After sunset, accompanied by Vettori and 'a large escort' – Machiavelli stayed behind – the leader of the Florentine Republic departed in disgrace. At first he headed towards Siena, but soon altered his course towards Ragusa, or modern Dubrovnik.²⁴

With his desertion of the city in its most desperate hour, though amid threats to his life, the arrival of Giovanni de' Medici was understood as imminent. More than a few people thought that they could detect a cooling of the body of the Republic. Above them, the unknown hand of an unfamiliar ruler seemed to descend with a no longer obscure inevitability.

III

Into a Tuscan Exile

The Aftermath of Freedom

Rarely perhaps has torture been so smoothly converted into literature. Rarely has suffering so efficiently blended into the invention of a guide to political thought that has outlasted centuries. For weeks after Soderini's departure, over the next couple of months, Machiavelli held on to his position as Second Chancellor, or was allowed to keep it. This in no way implies that all was easy, or even that bloodshed was entirely avoided, only that the occasional riots and slaughter failed to affect the general peace or the more elegant rooms of the Palazzo. The unfinished frescoes by Michelangelo and Leonardo continued undisturbed on the walls of the Grand Council chamber.

As early as 1 September, Giovanni de' Medici's brother Giuliano staged his arrival in the city. Shaved, and wearing his street clothes, he did a walkabout with friends, peering at and admiring his surroundings. The imprisonment of Prato's wealthier citizens, still held for ransom, continued. Giovanni had set himself up, at first in the *piazza* at the doors to the Palazzo della Signoria and then inside it, accompanied by a Signoria of his own, along with squads of troops and armed citizens.

During the early days of the momentous political change, triumphant Spanish soldiers continued to stream into Florence, attempting to sell off the loot they had collected during the sack. Hated everywhere, they were often lured into ambushes and murdered by the incensed and frustrated citizens.¹

Giovanni himself handled his seizure of power with reasonable sophistication and care. He clearly understood that more would be needed to prevent a Florentine uprising than a merely arbitrary proclamation and the enforcement of his wishes. Above all, he understood that he needed legitimacy. From the start, therefore, he reassured citizens and others that his return to his native city, officially proclaimed on 14 September in the company of 200 cavalymen and a pre-arranged crowd of followers, should not be viewed as a reversion to the pleasure-despising, repressive government of Savonarola. Pleasures would

be allowed. Businesses, festivals and education could go on. No magnanimity, however, kept his supporters from arranging a pro-Medici demonstration in the *piazza* before the Palazzo. It at once led into a contrived demand for a complete Medici restoration, along with, as Machiavelli put it, ‘the honours and dignities of their ancestors.’

On 16 September Melchior Ramazotti, a Medici commander, ‘together with his soldiers’ and ‘other men, [raced into] the Palazzo, shouting “Palle, palle” [Balls, balls: a reference to the Medici family crest, and the Medici rallying cry]. The ... city was suddenly up in arms, and [the Medici] name was echoing everywhere.’² This outburst seemed impressive enough, but it failed to tamp down the persisting hostility. As Giovanni realized, melodrama could scarcely overcome long-simmering suspicions of his family’s obsession with power, and more convincing measures would be necessary.

The seizure of the Palazzo was thus allowed to merge with his summoning a *parlamento*, or an all-inclusive assembly of citizens. Supervised by Spanish soldiers who surrounded them in the *piazza*, they compliantly voted to abolish Savonarola’s Grand Council. They also created Medici-agreeable replacement committees and reduced the *Gonfaloniere’s* term of office from Soderini’s lifetime length to fourteen months.³ The office itself was turned over to Giovanbattista Ridolfi, a well known member of the *frateschi*, or the followers of Savonarola, a faction that for years had drawn Soderini’s wealthier enemies into its ranks. Ridolfi insisted that he had no plans to remain *Gonfaloniere* for longer than two months.

At this point Giovanni de’Medici allowed himself to be ‘persuaded’ to organize a *Balia*, or administrative group. Its powers were extensive, and it could intrude at will into all the towns, villages and valleys of the Republic. He limited membership in the *Balia* to forty-six, cannily appointing a number of Soderini supporters, among them Piero Alamanni, Jacopo Salviati and Piero Guicciardini. Their prominence, together with the *Balia’s* suggestion of some sort of continuity of representative government, as opposed to being simply an arena for Medici whims, attracted smatterings of citizen support. Meanwhile the Republican secretariat, including Machiavelli and his colleagues, continued at the Palazzo, working on as before.

Each of these configurations may indicate why Machiavelli from the start felt less uneasy about remaining at his desk. They may shed light on his effort to work with the new régime, which at first he seems to have managed with no lack of interest. The changes may also point up the oddity of his being

sacked on 7 November. Without warning, the Signoria announced that it had 'dismissed, deprived and totally removed him' (*cassaverunt, privaverunt et totaliter amoverunt*). Only one of his fellow secretaries was also sacked, his friend Biagio Buonaccorsi.

The dismissal seems even stranger when set against a conciliatory letter that he had written to Giuliano, to whom Machiavelli's youthful poems had once been addressed, on 29 September. Still acting as Second Chancellor, he had offered his estimate of how the Medici might succeed in 'win[ning] friends over to your side and not turn[ing] them away,' or what amounted to a crafty psychological analysis of a delicate political situation. He no doubt hoped that the Medici would welcome it: 'I ... should see to it that [after a discussion in the *Balia*] ... it would be decided that you should have from the Commune of Florence ... four or five thousand ducats per year as an imbursement to your house.' A public pay-off could be arranged, in effect blessing the new administration with the Florentine imprimatur.⁴

A second letter supporting them, his 'Caution to the Medici Faction' [*Ai Pallechi*], which he wrote during this confused time, was probably likewise meant to add fuel to his dimming fires. In September his position as head of the Nine in charge of the Republic's militia had also been abolished. The militia itself, mauled during the sack of Prato but regarded by the Medici as a potentially seditious force, had been disbanded. 'I wish to caution you,' he had then urged the two brothers, but especially, as may be surmised, Giovanni, 'against the counsel of those who argue that you would benefit by exposing Piero Soderini's shortcomings.'

Little could be achieved, he had maintained, from slandering the exiled Florentine leader: as far as the Medici were concerned, any effort to advance themselves through insult could backfire: 'By exposing [him they could] destroy his reputation but not in any way strengthen [their] own position, only that of ... individuals who were his enemies... . These enemies would then have more influence with the populace [than they themselves].'⁵

Admittedly, Machiavelli's motives in producing these documents may have been disingenuous: after writing to him from Ragusa, and at some risk to his safety, Soderini had been grateful for his reply: 'I know you and the guiding compass of your navigation; and if it could be condemned, which it cannot, I would not condemn it.'

As all Machiavelli's defensive moves came to nothing – or at least no record exists

of their success – what followed three days later in November can only have seemed laced with viciousness. At a minimum, it indicated that Giovanni and Giuliano saw him merely as an unrepentant Soderini loyalist. How else explain his sentencing by the new Signoria on 10 November to a year's confinement to Florentine territories, amounting to an intra-state term of imprisonment? How else understand their order banning him from entering the Palazzo, and another requiring him to pay a deposit, or type of bail bond, of a thousand gold florins, a huge sum that he did not have but that friends such as Francesco Vettori cobbled together for him? What sense could be made of the Signoria's summary dismissal of one of the Republic's most valued civil servants?⁶

Worse was coming. The bitterness directed at him had probably been shaping up ever since a distasteful incident on 3 January 1511, when Piero Soderini issued a proclamation of treason against anyone residing at Cardinal Giovanni's house or that of his brother, or having anything to do with them. Filippo Strozzi, one of the Republic's most prosperous men, had soon afterwards uncovered a conspiracy against Piero. It was apparently organized by Giovanni in revenge for the blocks placed on his promoting the marriage of Piero de' Medici's daughter Clarice to Filippo. The marriage would have guaranteed a strong Medici influence over the Republic. Machiavelli's role in deterring the marriage, along with his support of Soderini's proclamation, had not been forgotten. Were a plot now uncovered against Giovanni, suspicions might reasonably settle on him as a co-conspirator.

Precisely this occurred in February 1513, though in less tempestuous times the discovery might have been ignored as unimportant. A conspiracy in progress, or so it seemed, and aimed at both Medici brothers, was exposed, ironically as their attitudes toward Machiavelli had begun to improve. His expulsion from the Palazzo, where he had sweated away over the previous fourteen years, had just been rescinded for a week or two as he was called in for quizzing about possible irregularities in his payments to the defunct citizen militia. He had showed up – Giovanni was busy there too, ordering several of the halls stripped of their woodwork to allow their remodelling into quarters for his troops – answered their accusations and been acquitted of misconduct.⁷

Such was not the case when his name was found inscribed as seventh on a scribbled list of eighteen to twenty likely plotters against Giovanni. The list had dropped out of the pocket of Piero Antoni Boscoli, who along with an idealistic accomplice, Agostino Capponi – they seem to have thought of themselves as

a modern Brutus and Cassius team, or as liberators of Florence from the new Medici-Caesar – had drawn up a sketchy plan to assassinate Giovanni and perhaps his brother. Few of the other collaborators seem to have known of Boscoli's list, and not Machiavelli, or so he swore on being arrested. His claim to innocence, which may have been genuine despite his avowed scepticism of the Medici, made no difference. He was hustled off to the Stinche for interrogation and torture. Boscoli and Capponi were sentenced to death.⁸

In the darkness of the small, befouled prison with its cells for about forty inmates, the Republic seemed conclusively to collapse. Threats of torture, pain and death confirmed a gloomy prophecy embodied in one of the strangest artistic displays ever mounted in the city just two years earlier, during the Carnival of 1511. The *Carro della Morte*, so called, had been designed and built in secret, in the Hall of the Pope, by Piero di Cosimo (1461/2–1521).

For the rest of their lives, or so the story went, those who saw it were unable to forget what they had seen. At the time, opinions differed over the meaning of Piero's triumphal Chariot of Death, drawn by stately black-dyed buffaloes, each painted with phosphorescent human bones scattered over alabaster crosses, above which sat a colossal, anthropomorphic shape bearing a fearsome scythe.

Crowds gazed in apprehension at the series of tombs built into the chariot. As its wheels creaked past, pausing here and there amidst a 'chanting,' or ghostly, windy music, the various tombs had opened and black figures decked out in other painted bones crept out of their mouths, greeted by weak-sounding horns and a muffled solemnity. Encircling the chariot, as Vasari reports, corpse-like figures rode by on black, bony horses. The hideous display had set a standard of imaginative terror for years in the carnivals to come, as did a quavering chant that rose over it in a rendition of a psalm of David, his *Miserere*. People whispered that Piero's float with its skeletal horses was intended to evoke the exiled Medici and their restoration. As if resurrected, they would soon return to inflict horrors on the city.⁹

This fate, or so it seemed, or something like it, had befallen Machiavelli in his cell at the Stinche, and on the *strappado*, as for Savonarola years earlier the expression of state power had earned the same reward. With his hands tied behind his back, in a room full of racks, iron torture shoes, thumb-screws and funnels, or out in the open street, where tortures were put on public display, he seems to have submitted to six drops or wrenchings by the wrist (*tratta di corde*), if his testimony is accepted. Each was ferocious enough to dislocate the shoulders.¹⁰

By any standards the punishment was horrific. Even after its application, though, as also seems credible on the evidence, plus what may be understood of his nature and resourcefulness, he appears astonishingly and almost at once to have turned to writing poetry. Resorting to his favourite form, that of the tailed sonnet, he produced a candid account and indictment of what had just happened to him. He addressed his poem to Giuliano de' Medici, and its purpose was to wring clemency from apparently rigid fingers. In fact the resort to poetry, and his dispatch of a poem to Giuliano, the Medici brother to whom he had years ago addressed poems of praise, and who was himself a cultivated man, may have seemed both last-ditch and appropriate – or in the end not as unusual a manoeuvre as sending a poem to his father about a goose. The crucial difference lay in the circumstances, which were evil as well as alarming.

Just before writing his sonnet, on 23 February 1513, or at about an hour before dawn (the hour mentioned in lines 10–12), he had heard intoned outside his cell the phrase *Pro eis ora* (Pray for them). This was the customary incantation for the procession of black-hooded monks trained in the *ars moriendi* manner of leading the condemned to their deaths. Boscoli and Capponi were being taken away to be beheaded.¹¹

If some modern readers remain sceptical that Machiavelli could have written poetry in these frightful circumstances, not to mention his own pain, and, more, come up with a polished sonnet full of complex images, controlled hyperboles and an ironic matter-of-fact tone, it may be recalled that just this type of surrender to literature, and against the odds, made practical sense – and when else might he have written it? For decades he had been schooled in writing poems of just this sort, or fashioning at speed the rhetorical flourishes that he knew might captivate and mollify if not win over his Medici audience:

Giuliano, I've got a set of shackles on my legs and six yanks of the cord across my shoulders: my other miseries I omit, since this is simply how they treat poets here.// The broken walls loom with lice as big and fat as butterflies, nor was there ever such a stench in Roncevalles [the bloody battlefield described in the French epic *La Chanson de Roland*] or Sardinia, among those groves, // as in this posh inn of mine. Amid a clatter resounding as if Jove and all Mongibello [Mount Etna] // were tossing thunderbolts about, the one prisoner is chained up and the other unchained, with his locks, keys and bolts dashing together: another screams, 'I'm too high off the floor!' – // What terrifies

me most is that toward dawn, sleeping, I began to hear, 'Pray for them!'//Well, let them go, I pray, as long as your mercy turns to me, and so surpasses the good name of your father and grandfather.

Some profit may lie in taking stock of the political situation here. Certainly he was not the first quasi-modern author to be snatched out of a life of relative comfort and unjustly imprisoned. Nor was he the first to face the possibility of execution. His contemporary, the biblical translator William Tyndale (1494–1536), and Dostoyevski centuries later, and Osip Mandelstam later still, come readily to mind. Yet he may have been among the first to meet the terror of political execution by depicting its vulgarity, incompetence and stupidity. He may also have been the first to do so at once, as might a modern journalist, or poet-journalist.

His grim, jesting sonnet, in which he acknowledges the executions of others while understandably praying for rescue, seems in addition unable to escape its modern atmosphere of unrelieved emergency. Put differently, it preserves a special coolness that sets its lines apart from Dante's or Michelangelo's, as it plunges relentlessly ahead.

Strikingly, it manages to do so in the absence of any reference to ceremony. The odd omission – of some nod to religion, say – draws attention to itself, not so much because it testifies to unbelief, which it may not, as because religion seems irrelevant. At a minimum, it seems to be discarded as a membrane capable of shielding sanity from agony and madness. Another type of membrane may be wanted. In the meantime, the poem's grim sense of humour suffices, or its jesting – and perhaps because his sonnet received no response, a few days later he seems have sent another, and now one in which he depicts himself as faintly ridiculous:

Last night, pleading that the muses, with their sweet zither and sweet songs, would, to console me, visit Your Magnificence and make my excuses, // one appeared who embarrassed me by saying, 'Who are you, who dares summon me?' I told her my name, and she, to torture me, slapped me across the face and shut my mouth // saying, 'You're not Niccolò but Dazzo [the well known Andrea Dazzi, a follower of Marcello Adriani and secretary of the First Chancellery], since your legs and heels are tied up and you're sitting here in chains like a madman.' // I tried making a rational reply, but she answered, 'Get on like the fool you are in your comedy of rags.' // So give her some proof, Magnificent Giuliano, that I'm not Dazzo, but me.¹²

In the end Giuliano's acceptance of Machiavelli's sonnets, if it occurred, would not have mattered as much as the mortal intercession that now helped him out. In Rome, on 21 February, at the age of sixty-nine, turning feverish while laying out his plans for his next military campaign, Julius II began to weaken. During the last days of January, as recorded by the Venetian ambassador, his body failed and sank. His mind remained lucid, however, and the papal warrior who by his own reckoning had never been able to sit still, and who might even have had a promising career as an art critic, realized that death was imminent. He tried eight types of wine to see whether any could restore his health. None did. He next summoned the College of Cardinals to his bedside to instruct them in the virtues of self-sacrifice. The most important was the rejection of simony. Some objected.

His daughter Felice asked for the restoration of her papal privileges. Julius refused her, and soon a large, adoring crowd, among whom pressed hundreds trying to kiss his exposed toes, followed his scented, bejewelled, befurred body to its burial place near his uncle Sixtus IV in the floor of the Vatican. Alongside his vigour, intelligence and piety, his familiar titanic eruptions, evident since the start of his papacy, seemed less disturbing.¹³ Unaware of his altered position in the Christian world, his successor-to-be, Giovanni de'Medici, just thirty-seven and also ailing, as well as sweaty, jolly, anxious and, as many were aware, flatulent, was trundled south from Florence on a fast-moving, bumpy litter.

Machiavelli's efforts to regain his freedom by appealing to him through their mutual friends, among them Francesco Vettori, seemed superfluous in the light of the amnesty, granted to all prisoners, even to forgiving their fines, that followed Giovanni's unanimous election on 11 March as Pope Leo X. The smoke of burning ballots at the Vatican ignited expressions of joy in Florence. Favours, including liberal dispensations, might follow.

Landucci reported that amid the thunder of 'cannon and continual cries of *Palle! Papa Leone!*' nearly all the wood in the city, ripped from its roofs, gates, parapets, doors, galleries and malmsey butts (once the wine had been drunk) was set afire in celebratory blazes before hundreds of houses by thousands of happy, oblivious citizens.¹⁴

'I got out of prison amid this city's universal rejoicing,' Machiavelli told Francesco Vettori on 13 March after returning home from watching the three-day-long street parties. Vettori, away in Rome, was now the Florentine Ambassador to the new Pope (he had first been sent to Rome as Ambassador to Julius).¹⁵

Uncertain of his future, especially in regard to money, Machiavelli had a wife and five children to support: Bernardo, Primerana, Lodovico, Bartolomea and Guido (though records regarding his children remain unclear).¹⁶ With another child on the way, he had certainly not forgotten the good words, no matter how useless they seemed at the time, that Francesco and his brother Paolo had tried and failed to put in on his behalf with the new Pope, 'for which I thank you.'

He remained acid about his imprisonment ('I shall not repeat the long story of my disgrace, but merely say that Fate has done everything to cause me this abuse'), relieved ('thank God it is over'), anxious to assist his brother Totto in securing a post in the new Vatican administration ('I implore both your favour and Paolo's for him') and eager for a job himself ('if it should be possible [that] either [the Pope] or his family might start engaging my services in some way').

He was agreeably impressed by his ability to deal with pain: 'I should like you to get this pleasure from these troubles of mine, that I have borne them so straightforwardly that I am proud of myself for it and consider myself more of a man than I believed I was.' If it was true that 'all that is left to me of my life I owe to the Magnificent Giuliano [which suggests that Giuliano may have received his prison-sonnets] and your Paolo [Vettori, who had also offered his assistance],' but having almost no money and confined to Republican territory for another nine months, he could at most look forward to scraping by.

Nonetheless, he remarked, 'I shall act in such a way that [everyone] will have reason to be proud of me.' Misleadingly, he recalled his childhood full of anxiety about his father's indebtedness, even if his family had never in a desperate peasant sense been poor: 'I was born in poverty and at an early age learned how to scrimp rather than to thrive.'

Scrimping might not be quite the unpleasant necessity that it seemed, as he admitted to the probably puzzled Francesco, who knew him. 'The whole gang [of his former co-workers] sends you [their] regards,' he wrote, and then offered a reassuring hat off some recent sexual adventures, which had been voluptuous and welcome: 'Every day we visit the house of some girl' – a previous girlfriend perhaps, or a prostitute in his good books – 'to recover our vigour.' Pleasure was not all, however, and an odd wistfulness had begun to circumscribe his thoughts, as if he had caught himself glancing into a mystery: 'And so we go on marking time ... enjoying the remainder of this life, so that it seems to me that I am making it all up.'¹⁷

Making History at Sant'Andrea

With the accession of the new Pope, the political leadership of Florence subsided into dour confusion. Machiavelli and his family decided to stay briefly at their large family house on the south bank of the Arno, between the Ponte Santa Trinità and the Ponte alla Carraia, near the corner of the Via del Santo Spirito and the narrow Via dei Coverelli, at numbers 5–7, or just behind the church.¹

From there it would have been a short walk, which he could no longer make with his old confidence, over one of the bridges to the Palazzo della Signoria, which remained closed to him. Nor did he do so. Over the next eight months he spent less than three weeks, either alone or with his family, in the city. Instead he retreated with them to the modest estate inherited from his father in the hills at Sant'Andrea in Percussina, nine winding miles south of the city gates, amid its vineyards, the summer heat, local farmers, birding, letter-writing – this often at considerable length – and reflections, mostly now on history and politics.

Giovanni's departure for Rome and his coronation in early April saw the elevation of his cousin Giulio to the position of Archbishop of Florence 'amid great rejoicings.' As before, wild celebrations led to a singular opportunity for happy if accidental moments of incineration, this time of 'the houses at the back of the Archbishop's palace.'²

Francesco Vettori, who seems often to have undervalued himself, or at least to have viewed his ambassador's role as of slight importance, had begun to prove too modest to advance Machiavelli's interests with the new Pope ('I am sorry to be able to offer you so little,' he wrote him on 30 March). Giuliano, Giovanni's brother, who had also moved to Rome, had been made a Roman patrician and commander of the Vatican's ecclesiastical troops. He exhibited only a mild interest in wielding administrative power in Florence itself. In August 1513, Giovanni appointed a newcomer to politics, his twenty-year-old nephew, Lorenzo de' Medici (1492–1519), nominal governor of the city, but with the understanding that he would accept papal advice. Given Lorenzo's meagre

experience, however, and his autocratic, excitable temperament full of smirks, quibbles and affectations, this appointment met with unease.

The election of the new Pope also opened a vacuum at the centre of power in Italy. It rapidly became an invitation to the players on the Italian military stage, the French, Germans, Venetians and Spanish, to stake out dramatic claims to wealth and influence. Over the following seven months, or from March through September, familiar foreign armies, fielded by one or another of the competing military powers, joined and fought, or retreated and fought, or bickered while licking their wounds, or withdrew in bloodied chagrin as Henry VIII of England maintained his soldierly pressure on what became their cascade of collisions.

Machiavelli heard of these clashes through Vettori's letters, sent on to him for advice in the quiet of his sanctuary at Sant'Andrea. On occasion he responded with estimates of the military and diplomatic options. 'If I could talk to you,' he wrote on 9 April, 'I could not help but fill your head with castles in the air [or speculations], because *Fortuna* has seen to it that since I do not know how to talk about either the silk or the wool trade, or profits or losses, I have to talk about politics.'³

His own career spent on pacifying the Italian countryside, or curbing the very assaults that once more began to overwhelm many Italian cities, his diplomatic and military struggles over the previous ten years, seemed to evaporate before his eyes. Florence looked adrift amid the new Pope's opportunities. Lorenzo, himself a Roman by upbringing, quickly disregarded the advice given him. He began to run Florence for himself, diverting the city's money to pay his soldiers. These soldiers would soon be put to use on the battlefield, or according to grandiose dreams of conquest.

In the meantime Machiavelli paused amid his political if not philosophical isolation in a tiny hilltop hamlet with its single, ribbony, sweltering street or, as one sees it today, its single *Alimentari* selling cheese, bread and groceries. The latter stands amid a row of stone houses, some showy and smart-looking, which curl along the old Roman post road towards San Casciano. As then, too, Sant'Andrea overlooks glorious, grapevined slopes, ancient olive groves, cypresses, oaks and pink, blue and lavender blossoms that preside over copse-green valleys. In summer, the single through road and the surrounding fields echo to the strident chirping of cicadas. The scents are full and sleepy.

Never perhaps had a self-designed exile seemed so calm, flexible and lush – not Ovid's, whose *Metamorphoses* Machiavelli knew, but who was banished by Augustus to a village on the Black Sea at the edge of the empire, where he had managed to do well despite the primitive conditions, and not Dante's, following his expulsion from Florence in the *trecento* to a roving, mazelike homelessness. Nor, with Sant'Andrea's lone, tower-topped church mounted on a rise behind its one street, and with the lovely, post-republican city situated far below its few houses, could his isolation have seemed better suited from a strategic point of view to admonishing his urban-haunted soul.

With church above and city below, the blue summer air swept between run-down stone buildings, cracked and rebuilt even then with old millstones, and in need of repair amid their rough-hewn windows. All this had now become his home. A short walk along the road to its tilt toward Florence, miles away, brought a glimpse of the *Duomo*. It seemed to shine like a pale rouge gem amid the distant trees, plump and tantalizing.

He owned a well and three buildings at Sant'Andrea, among them the *Albergaccio*, or *casa da signore*, so called (it meant 'wretched inn') after the *albergo* just behind it. There he and his family slept, rose and ate. The *albergo* had long served as a crude tavern and stopover place for workers in the fields. Travellers stopped in en route to Florence, Siena or San Casciano, with its weekly farmers' market, two miles away. Across the road – or former *Strada regia romana* – stood a thick stone building where the family's coat of arms could, and still can, be seen carved over the fireplace, with its oil press, wine press and stables. A vegetable garden just behind sat over earth-immured cellar vaults for wine storage (plate XII).

If the scenery was rustic, reassuring and even beautiful, luxuries were few. Machiavelli had inherited a commercial farm with a vineyard and some scattered additional acres. What now seemed important, if perhaps unsurprising, was his unselfpitying adaptation to his new circumstances. Diplomacy had quickly surrendered to crops and fence-mending. Military analysis had not, though, or not always.

On 6 June Louis XII and his Venetian allies were defeated by the Spanish and Milanese in the Battle of Novara. In a letter to Vettori, Machiavelli wrote of the resulting military turmoil, that 'considering the current state of affairs, I should be as afraid of a new treaty as a new war.'⁴ Louis suffered another defeat in July, inflicted by the armies of Henry VIII. It prompted the French King's abandonment of all plans for future operations in Italy. By now the Florentine ex-Secretary was no more than concerned. His daytime hours were spent in

tending his vines, hunting (mostly thrushes) and, at night, reading, thinking about history and, in four-hour stints by candle-light, writing up his at first disjointed reflections on Livy. He had to hand the Roman author's ancient history and other books. He had requisitioned them from friends and his own library and brought them to Sant'Andrea by donkey.

History had always somehow been at the forefront of his thoughts, as indicated by his letters, for instance to Vettori on 10 August 1513: 'I beg you to reflect upon human affairs as they should be given credence and upon the powers of the world – and particularly of republics – how they develop: you will realize how at first men are satisfied with being able to defend themselves and with not being dominated by others; from this point they move on to attacking others physically and seeking to dominate them.'⁵

Just now history seemed to offer greater consolations than usual, or greater at least since finishing his *First Decennale*. If he harboured some idea of extending his account of the Florentine 'tragedy' beyond 1509 into a *Second Decennale*, though, he had so far made no attempt to do so.

Instead he directed his attention elsewhere, to the energetic, lugubrious first-century Roman historian, about whom so little was known. The conundrum of the Roman Empire, with its dizzy vastness, success and failure, attracted him as never before, along with its intriguing relations to the messy present. To some extent, to be sure, the empire had remained a humanist fascination absorbing him since childhood and his father's preparation of an index for the 1476 edition of Livy's history, when he was seven.

Did he turn to Bernardo's old copy of Livy's history, of which only 35 books of 142 had survived? The chances are great that he did, and that he might even have experienced a type of vindication on engaging with the Roman historian's work at the country estate that had meant so much to his debt-stricken father. Bernardo's index, mapping out the ancient political world, might now be joined with his own response to Roman and modern history. It could provide the impetus for an extension of the family's contribution to a deeper political investigation – or a new brand of *scientia* – and in an original way.

The idea of originality had itself always seemed crucial to him, and perhaps never more so than now. He was to insist on it in an introduction written later to what was about to become his first book in prose, the *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (Discourses on the First Decade [or first ten books] of Livy). Originality meant risk-taking. It might even be as adventurous, or so he was

later to argue, as the storms and voyages into the unknown experienced by the explorers among his contemporaries ‘seek[ing] out new lands and seas [in the Americas]’. These risks deserved recognition, if only because any author who sought ‘to bring a common benefit to everyone’ with originality, and so ‘establish new systems and institutions,’ was bound to attract ‘trouble and hardship.’ A majority would be ‘more eager to blame than to praise the actions of others.’ At the start of his most daring sally so far into literature, therefore, among the hills of Sant’Andrea, he had already begun to take note of the potential new dangers to his already battered reputation. The road to innovation could easily be marred by unexpected pitfalls of disgrace.⁶

But why Livy in any case? The connections with his father and his childhood aside, other Roman historians, among them Tacitus, Florus and Suetonius, whose accounts Vettori recommended ‘to while away the time’ in a letter from Rome on 23 November, might just as easily have aroused his interest. Even earlier historians, such as Sallust (86–34 BCE) and Polybius (c.205–c.123 BCE), in the end influenced several of the more elegant or almost truffle-like sections of his *Discorsi*.

Yet the irresistible appeal of Livy seemed to lie in a coincidence of their temperaments, backgrounds and attitudes toward the past. Above all, they seemed to agree on how change, perhaps the most important ingredient of any history, came about in the world. For Livy, as for Machiavelli, the essential sources of change lay in the personalities of the actors who dominated the historical stage, the vagaries of *Fortuna* – or other people and circumstances – and *virtú*, or the strength and skills of the actors. Neither strength nor skills had anything to do with ethics, which both viewed as irrelevant to political achievements.

Beyond these similarities lay the two historians’ almost parallel relations to public life, or the fact that Livy in Rome, like his successor in Florence, had to some extent played the role of outsider. Livy had known but not gained the complete confidence and trust of the important leaders of his day, in his own case that of Augustus. Both seem also to have shared the conviction that their civilizations, even in their moments of triumph, were failures: ‘I would have [my reader, writes Livy] ‘trace the process of our moral decline, to watch, first, the sinking of the foundations of morality as the old teaching was allowed to lapse, then the rapidly increasing disintegration, then the final collapse of the whole edifice, and the dark dawning of our modern day when we can neither endure our vices nor face the remedies needed to cure them.’ For Livy, as for

Machiavelli a millennium and a half later, history remained 'the best medicine for a sick mind ... [in which] you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid.'⁷

Machiavelli's organizing principle from the start was to write 142 short chapters of commentary that would correspond to the number of Livy's known historical books. If many had been lost, lists of the events described in all but two of the lost books had survived. Machiavelli's larger plan was to account for the growth of political institutions, states and empires from their beginnings to their rise and fall, but not systematically. His method, as his title makes plain, would be discursive, or rambling and even informal. For reasons never explained he would concentrate on Livy's first ten books, and these only loosely. His style was to be ruminative, his approach allusive. It would be capacious enough to allow for the occasional reference to Ovid, Virgil and other poets with relevant insights.

Aristotle, Plato and utopian thinkers of recent times, such as Savonarola, had produced accounts of the past modelled on their political goals, or what ought to be – human happiness, for instance, in the case of Aristotle: 'every state ... is established with a view to some good'. Machiavelli planned to limit his commentaries to what had actually happened. Prescription, while not eliminated, would be restricted. In this manner, a new kind of political knowledge could be coaxed into existence. Its basis would be empirical in that its premises would meet elementary tests of evidence. Conclusions about the present would be measured against patterns and events recovered from the past. His reasons never appeared less than commonsensical: if people did not change over time – a major premise – then the discovery of patterns between past and present must be as inevitable as illuminating. History might not be cyclical, but it would present similar phenomena in various guises.

During the summer of 1513, his developing *Discorsi* seemed to slot into still another pattern, a division into three books. The first was to deal with how states acquired their forms, citizens and institutions; the second with how they matured, including descriptions of their types of conquests; and the third with how they expanded until decay set in, often as the result of conspiracies, as they fell apart.⁸ Here too the design would be left open. Sections might overlap. Digressions would be tolerated, personal reminiscences encouraged. The point was to ignore nothing politically significant, or to let as few fish as possible

escape his net. It was also to reject false combinations of the facts and resist facile conclusions. In more modern terms, there was to be no encouragement, either consciously or unconsciously, of ideals, popular causes or ideological systems.

The *Discorsi's* structure would also render impossible the advocacy of any position as correct in all circumstances. Ethical principles, for example, might on occasion prove destructive to a state's political health. They might even be subversive. Machiavelli's method would serve as a corrective to such instances, and even to his own natural desires to impose meanings. In no sense could his work ever be regarded as finished – or no more so than the essays of Montaigne (1533–92), to which it would often be compared.

Here might be originality indeed, though during the summer of 1513 his so far assembled commentaries may have seemed a mere mishmash. What he foresaw, as his introduction was later to make plain, was that his method and results would act as a challenge to any reader who expected the sort of artificial neatness to be found in most other histories. A gauntlet would be thrown down before writers and readers, and before those competent historical accounts, such as Bruni's, which to their credit had also relied on evidence and research. The conventions of story-telling, with cherry-picked beginnings, middles and endings, were to be avoided. The aim was to be as revealing of the disorder among the facts as possible.

By mid-July he had finished a major part of the first section, or Book I, though it is likely that bits had been written earlier and were now altered and reshuffled.

The chief evolving theme, stringing together his to this point combined facts and reflections, was and remained change, and this of the social, political and military varieties. It seemed in no way belied by his parallel assertion of the fundamentally unchanging nature of human beings. Perhaps for the first time too, the principle of change was viewed as governed by two causes. The first was human irrationality and its consequences, an anti-medieval idea. The second, surprisingly (for who else had considered it?), was boredom:

As all human things are kept in a perpetual movement, and can never remain stable, states naturally either rise or decline, and necessity compels them to many acts to which reason will not influence them... [If] Heaven favours [that a particular state] ... never ... be involved in war, [its] continued tranquillity would enervate [it], or provoke

internal dissensions, which together, or either of them separately, will be apt to prove [its] ruin.⁹

Wars might as easily be started out of a need for amusement, it seemed, or as an alternative to inertia, as for seemingly profound reasons. This hypothesis was bolstered by his view of governments as generally desperate affairs, constantly threatened by emotions.

The history of republics showed that only a citizen's right to accuse, combined with the rule of law, might act as a counterweight to the power of emotions run riot: 'Nothing ... renders a republic more firm and stable than to organize it in such a way that the excitement of ill-humours ... may have a way prescribed by law for venting itself': it is 'necessary for a republic to have laws that afford ... the masses the opportunity of giving vent to the hatred they may have conceived against any citizen.'¹⁰

Of great importance, though it may seem peculiar to those who wish to see him as unapologetically anti-Christian, anti-clerical, anti-papal or anti-religious, was the role that he imputed to religion in maintaining the state, and in particular any republic: 'Whoever reads Roman history attentively will see in how great a degree religion served in the command of the armies, in uniting the people and keeping them well conducted'; 'religion [is] the most necessary and assured support of any civil society' – though nothing here sheds light on his own attitudes towards God and the Church.¹¹

This may not have been necessary. As he makes plain, he had long since come to see human beings as mixtures of good and evil, rather than the one or the other, and to re-examine his earlier beliefs about mass murderers such as Giampaolo Baglioni, whose surrender to Julius II, unexpected in view of his military superiority, he had witnessed at Perugia in 1505. Changing one's mind might be as rational as it was practical. Memory might best be understood as an instrument of a revising intelligence. Where he had earlier been convinced that Baglioni was simply overwhelmed by Julius's rhetorical abilities, he now conceded that the Perugian ruler's emotional complexity, despite his viciousness, could have been greater than had once seemed conceivable.¹²

Machiavelli changed his mind as well about other significant figures out of his immediate past, such as Cesare Borgia and Louis XII. He seemed willing to ascribe their achievements less to extraordinary abilities than to Florentine fears, glibness and foolishness: 'It is the worst fault of feeble republics to be

irresolute, so that whatever part they take is dictated by force ... Their weakness never allows them to resolve upon anything where there is a doubt.¹³

As Book I of the *Discorsi* grew and expanded, he also began to place a greater emphasis on princes and princely types, such as kings and popes, than on semi-democratic republics. The focus of his attention had begun to shift, at least for the moment, to autocrats and principalities, or dominions. Republics might not be suitable for everyone: 'Let [them] be established where equality exists, and on the contrary, principalities where great inequality prevails.' To establish a stable republic it might be advisable to eliminate the gentility, or the idle rich, either by expulsion, taxation or murder.¹⁴

By mid-summer he had set up a stable routine to accommodate both his farm life and his wish to write, or a schedule which in itself indicated that as the lights of his interest altered from going on with the *Discorsi* to possibly producing a quite different book – and this by the end of July – he had already begun to groom himself for the effort. His new book might emerge from his commentaries but it would centre more completely on princes. Farm life was prompting originality along unexpected lines.

At about this time Marietta gave birth to a girl who died after three days, though she herself survived. Machiavelli felt physically well 'but ill in every other respect.' He was 'grateful' that God had 'not [so far] abandoned me.'¹⁵

His devotion to clarity, so vital to the *Discorsi* and crucial to any new book, poured out in a letter to his nephew, friend and confidant Giovanni Vernacci on 4 August: 'I urge you to use a clear style ... so that whenever [people read a letter by you] they think, because your way of writing is so detailed, that you are there.' The journalist, historian and poet of his better days seemed not only in accord with each other, but in rehearsal for a new undertaking.¹⁶

November found him well into it. The book seemed to fit awkwardly among others in the medieval moral tradition of the so-called 'mirrors of princes' and others on the subject of governing, by Majo (*d.1493*) and Diomede Carafa (1406–87), *De regis et boni principis officio* (On the office of king and the good prince). In fact its novelty was soon to exceed that of the *Discorsi*.

Vettori teased him about his unusual silence. He sent his friend a description of his own typical day as Florentine ambassador to Rome, mostly to prompt him into describing his life at Sant'Andrea. At Rome Vettori was doing well by spending more than he could afford on 'a nice house [with] many small rooms' not far from Saint Peter's Square. He was up by ten and off to the Vatican. There he exchanged twenty words with the Pope, ten with Giulio de' Medici, six with

Giuliano de' Medici and fewer with the petty officials from whose whispers he deduced the day's gossip and political news.

His diplomatic duties over, he hurried home to lunch with his household and guests, played a few games of cards, took a late afternoon horseback ride beyond the city gates (he kept seven horses plus a staff of nine, including a chaplain) and spent the evening reading Roman historians such as Livy, Florus, Sallust, Tacitus, Suetonius 'and those others who write about the emperors' such as Herodian and Procopius: 'With them I pass the time; and I consider the emperors that this poor Rome, which once made the world tremble, has put up with.'¹⁷

On 10 December, Machiavelli took Vettori's bait and replied with a letter of his own – it was to become his most famous – in which he sketched out his day at Sant'Andrea while letting his friend know that a new writing scheme was in place and was distracting him. He might send along his results for Vettori's approval. He felt anxious about them, though, seeing himself as a bit like the proverbial fox when confronted with a lion, or so he had referred to himself in a letter back in August. He might surrender to apprehension, 'almost die of fright' and 'hid[e] ... behind a clump of bushes to [peer out]'. Nonetheless, 'having collected [his] wits,' he would try to answer his friend's request for information as best he could:

I get up in the morning with the sun and go into one of my woods that I am having cut down; there I spend a couple of hours inspecting the work of the previous day and kill some time with the woodsmen who always have some dispute on their hands either among themselves or with their neighbours. I could tell you a thousand stories about these woods and my experiences with them.¹⁸

He refrains from doing so, however, and instead speaks of wandering off to hang out his 'bird-nets' for thrushes. He totes 'a book under my arm: Dante, Petrarch or one of the minor poets like Tibullus, Ovid, or some such. I read about their amorous passions and their loves, remember my own, and these reflections make me happy for a while.'

After lunch, which he takes at home, he heads over to the inn behind his house, and there through the afternoon does a sort of slumming with the innkeeper, a butcher, a miller and kiln-workers. He squabbles and shouts his way through backgammon games, which 'get the mould out of my brain and let the malice out of my fate.' Evening brings him home again, or round the

corner, but now to enter his study. Here during the next few hours his writing and a leap in his very existence seem to tumble out of the evening air: 'On the threshold I take off my workday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and put on the garments of court and palace.'¹⁹

These would have included his *Lucco*, or the ample toga-like red cloth, a symbol of Florentine citizenship. Given his father's indebtedness, he would have been prevented from wearing it until at the age of nineteen in 1488 he became a citizen himself. Most Florentines considered the *Lucco* as valuable as an ancient Roman senatorial toga, and the city saw itself as the daughter of Rome. His desire to wear it thus seems more than poignant. Despite ostracism, arrest, torture and dismissal, as he donned his citizen's cloth, or decked himself out according to a revered tradition, he might slip back into the civilized ancient world, move among its thinkers, and wander through ancient as well as modern history²⁰: 'Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that *alone* is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about their motives, ... and they, out of their human kindness, answer me.'

Here, then, might be the polished circumstances, including an appropriate rural isolation, in which *The Prince* could be written: 'Dante says that no one understands anything unless he retains what he has understood, [and so] I have jotted down what I have profited from in their conversation, and composed a short study, *De principatibus* (On Principalities, or usually *The Prince*), in which I delve as deeply as I can into the ideas concerning this topic, discussing the definition of a principedom [or any established territory: it might have little or nothing to do with an hereditary prince], the categories of principedoms, how they are acquired, how they are retained, and why they are lost.'²¹ The overriding problem, to be sure, to which he had devoted a great deal of attention over many years, was why they were lost.

Power and Memory

The rapidly emerging book, though no more than a fifth the length of what the *Discorsi* would later become, turned out above all to be an act of recollection. What he remembered blended with deductions from his humanist principles.

A few telling aspects stand out at once. Strikingly, and despite his frequent references to ancient history and Roman historians, what he recalls seems mostly to be his personal past, or his experiences among the princes and other rulers whom he has seen in action. *The Prince* is a fiercely contemporary book. Second, as in the *Discorsi* so far, he often alters his views of his past. The Cesare Borgia of his legations and letters, for instance, differs somewhat from the Cesare who appears in these pages. Third, his diction and style are unusual in ways that set them apart from those of other political books. These continue to influence even now how his ideas are understood.

The literary shift has little to do with the length of his sentences and their rhetorical structure, which retain the eely coils recognizable in the work of other Italian authors, if without their 'rounded periods or big, impressive words.' It has much more to do with the flame-like intimacy running through his personal letters, or his vivacity and insolence. If the clarity is sublime, his candour comes as a splash of ice water. His focus throughout is also well nigh perfect. If, as has often been noted, *The Prince* explores a fenced-in realm of political power while offering a manual on how to acquire and keep it, power remains its only theme.

His twenty-six short chapters thus pay scant attention to ethics, the pleasures of power and even cruelty, except in the last chapter, which he may have added later, in which he pleads for the rescue of Italy from foreign invaders: 'Italy, left almost lifeless, waits for a leader who will heal her wounds.' Subsequent attempts, whether out of embarrassment, distaste, compassion or mistrust, to pretend that the book is about something other than power, such as suppressed republicanism, seem doomed to frustration and self-contradiction.

Almost immediately the book homes in on treachery as a crucial aspect of power, and its scope and methods, or how to practise it, refine it, restrict its consequences so as to get away with it while improving on it and perfecting it. Deceitful tactics are seldom viewed in a favourable light, however. They are never presented as attractive in themselves. Nor are they viewed as guiding principles. Instead, painted with as menacing a reddish hue as Darwin's legendary tooth and claw, they are treated as essential to improving the aptness of princely or any other politics, much as a surgeon might require both a scalpel and bloodshed to save a patient's life.

Readers with little enthusiasm for seeing his book along these often disturbing lines, which he regards as realistic, may reject it out of hand, or even disgust, nausea, bitterness, bafflement and disbelief. They may shrug it off or dismiss the author as a cynic. In fact he seems not even to be a pessimist. As later becomes clear, though, he wishes above all to be seen as a diagnostician of an intractable difficulty: how to handle political negotiations and military conflicts while retaining political power. He also assumes that if he elucidates this problem as clearly as possible he may win honour for himself and find a decent job.

Finding a job by writing a good book seemed of enormous importance, even if nothing was to come of it. Machiavelli introduces his interest in future employment almost at once, in his book's dedication to Giuliano de' Medici, though after Giuliano's death in 1516, he rededicated it to the more sympathetic Lorenzo, as if what he had written was itself a brilliant résumé or job application – brilliant because it might show his prospective employer how to keep his own job: 'If you read it and consider it diligently, you will discover in it my wish that you reach that eminence that fortune and your other qualities promise you.'¹

This was not to be. Either Giuliano never saw the book, perhaps because Vettori, who may have had his own reservations about the violence of his friend's ideas, never showed it to him (Vettori nonetheless wrote to him on 18 January 1513 [14], 'I have seen the chapters of your work, and I like them immeasurably, but since I do not have the entire work, I do not want to make a definitive judgement'²), or because Giuliano saw it and frowned, possibly over its advocacy of appalling methods.

Machiavelli seems also not to have attempted to see his book through the press, though he fiddled with several of its chapters at least into 1514. Instead, he allowed it to be copied and shown about. The result was that at the beginning of its nonpareil literary career, which continues among the most influential of

any books analysing political power, *The Prince* acquired a reputation for evil based on a meagre first-hand knowledge of its contents, as if a lit fuse sizzled away in the dark.

This lost opportunity seems the more surprising because the entire book is both frank and practical. After disposing in his early chapters of basic questions, such as the types of principalities – whether inherited or bestowed, or purchased, acquired by theft, slaughter and assassination – Machiavelli takes up the thorny question of any principality's military needs. Here, as might be expected, he urges the establishment of a citizen militia not dissimilar to what Cesare and he had earlier set up, if without mercenaries. Law and order now become a leitmotif, though Machiavelli insists that order alone may suffice for the prince who knows his business.³

The next sections deal with the psychology of power, or with how a prince or other ruler may sensibly manage his subjects. These are more controversial than the rest because in them he comes down heavily in favour of lying, playing people false, including allies, and oath-breaking for the sake of defeating any opposition. His premise is that humanity under pressure is dishonest, flaccid and untrustworthy:

One can make this generalization about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit; while you treat them well, they are yours. They would shed their blood for you, risk their property, their lives, their sons, so long ... as danger is remote; but when you are in danger, they turn away.⁴

As against human insincerity, any confident prince, both remarkably and alone among everyone else in his realm or under his sway, will come to see his ambitions as flourishing in a type of private realm of their own. They will seem beyond the reach of others, or at least beyond ideology. With survival and power remaining for him and his supporters their only worry, all other values or systems of belief will appear of less consequence than the disobedience of a pet dog, or as requiring only punishment, reproof and restraint. The physical demands of power, and the acts of treachery needed to sustain it, will overshadow all abstract principles.

Machiavelli argues that as people 'are a sad lot, and keep no faith with you, you in your turn are under no obligation to keep it with them.' He reverts to an image that he has previously found useful. He proposes that a clever prince ought to 'pick for imitation the fox and the lion,' vacillating between cunning

and brutality, as the situation may warrant. He should 'be ready to enter on evil if he has to,' and have no compunction about becoming 'a great liar and hypocrite' – phrases which leave little doubt that he believes in evil as an acceptable policy.⁵

The unavoidable yet major problem of *Fortuna*, which has to do with a prince's need to adapt to changing circumstances and a possible inability to do so, he deals with only at the end. Here he maintains that while *Fortuna* may be an implacable foe of human success, she can often be tamed – and he now makes plain his belief in the limited effectiveness of human free will – but only by force, or as one might deal with a stubborn woman: 'It is better to be rash than timid, for [*Fortuna*] is a woman, and the man who wants to hold her down must beat and bully her.'⁶

In this shadowy arena may be discovered Cesare Borgia's fatal mistake. Always ready to react with force no matter what the circumstances, and thus rarely drawn down the quieter paths of calculated retreat, he used the same tactics over and over again, or predictably at the wrong times, as when he was killed by knights whom he had rashly pursued but who turned on him, or even earlier when he fell ill while his father lay dying and so allowed his influence to be dissipated: 'Though one man recently showed certain gleams, such as made us think that he was ordained by God for our salvation, still we saw how at the very zenith of his career, he was deserted by [*Fortuna*].'⁷

It is here that the most telling connections between *The Prince*, the *Discorsi* and the other major artistic achievements of the day seem most fully on display. The conspicuous themes of the book are its uncompromising naturalism and its empirical approach to reality, which dovetail with those of the contemporary painting and sculpture. Both reveal an insistence on reality as ceaseless motion and change. Both implicitly look ahead to the weakening of European confidence in the staid repetitions of the Ptolemaic System, or with how over the previous thousand and more years everyone had understood the physical universe to be operating.

Beyond these points of comparison, there shine out in Machiavelli's style traces of the growing fashion, permeating literature ever since the invention of the sonnet, for expressing self-conscious conflicts. Put in another way, the aesthetic naturalism of his political insights has not perhaps received as much attention as it deserves, even if the influences on his childhood and adulthood

of world-changing artists such as Benozzo Gozzoli, Michelangelo and Leonardo remain deeply suggestive.

The rhythms and muscularity of Michelangelo's human figures expose transformations unfamiliar to artists of a century earlier. Leonardo's sketches for his *Battle of Anghiari*, like his attempt to divert the Arno, and Gozzoli's depiction in the Medici chapel of the journey of the Magi, with its parade of *cavalieri* mounted on powerfully muscular horses, parse motion in novel and exact ways, doing so decades before Galileo proposed his mathematical description of the universe as a theatre of shifting changes and a field for the permutation of star-packed gravitational forces.

As much might have been said of a third tailed sonnet which Machiavelli sent to Giuliano in early 1514. The poem deals with a gift of trapped thrushes, but is impressive for their deft insertion into an unfolding drama that shows the poet under siege by his enemies, even as he ekes out a private victory:

I send you, Giuliano, some thrushes, not because this gift is good or fine, but so that for a moment Your Magnificence may remember your poor Machiavelli.//And if nearby you find somebody who likes biting, you can hit him in the teeth with it, so that as he eats the bird[s] he may forget about biting others.//'But,' you say,'perhaps they will not have the effect you speak of, because they are neither good nor fat: backbiters will not eat them.' I answer any such words to the effect that I too am thin, me too, as my enemies well know, and yet they get some hearty mouthfuls off me.//Won't Your Magnificence at last give up your [poor] opinion [of me], and feel and touch, and judge by the hands [or investigate] and not just by what you see?⁸

What was to be seen was his exclusion from the treacherous political worlds of Florence and Rome, whose vigour his witty Tuscan Italian hints at in crisp phrases (*ch'io son maghero anch'io, come lor sano*: I am thin, me too, as my enemies well know). The sonnet's earthy intimacy seems of a piece with change itself, or with adaptation, though its pliancy is anticipated by poems of Villon, whom Machiavelli had not read, and Dante, whom he had.

Appropriately, he also seems to have written and left unfinished at about this time a short essay on Tuscan and its sinewy superiority to other Italian dialects, a *Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua* (Discourse or dialogue concerning our language). The essay is unexpectedly if devastatingly critical of Dante, who had been among the first to whip Tuscan into a literary language but who Machiavelli sees as a slavish imitator of classical poets such as Virgil.

Despite his greatness as a poet, Dante exercised an unhealthy influence on the political development of Italy and the West.⁹ His mistake lay in his acceptance of imperial rule and his insufficient appreciation of the inevitability of treachery in politics. These were blunders resulting from self-delusions. An annihilation of self-delusion was one of the chief goals of *The Prince*.

Even in the scientific sense of his own day, none of these views, including those of Dante, might in fairness have been regarded as terribly gloomy. Laying bare the role of treachery in politics, or seeing politics as provoking treacherous acts, amounted to accepting that one inhabited a universe whose basis was mutation. In such a universe, ethical issues necessarily took second or third place, despite the purported goodness of God and the fact that the universe itself was governed by physical, emotional and spiritual laws. The uncertainty of the political world required a constant frustration of ethical ambitions. Even the gifted prince must find his opportunities bitterly circumscribed.

The Ambush of Love

‘While living in the country I have met a creature so gracious, so refined, so noble – both in nature and in circumstance – that never could my praise or my love for her be as much as she deserves.’ Thus one of his letters to Vettori on 3 August 1514.

He was writing from Florence, to which he had begun regularly to return. That his ‘creature’ was a country woman whom he saw on the sly, probably the unnamed widowed sister of one Niccolò Tafani, seemed as seductive as his enchantment: ‘Suffice it to say that although I am approaching my fiftieth year [he was forty five], neither does the heat of the sun distress me, nor do rough roads wear me out, nor do the dark hours of the night terrify me: I adapt to her every whim ... [and] even though I may now seem to have entered into great travail, I nevertheless feel so great a sweetness in it that not for anything in the world would I desire my freedom.’

He had fallen for another sort of freedom, though. Whether because Vettori had been able to read the whole of *The Prince*, and found it unacceptable, or because he had abandoned his own high hopes for it, he had freed himself at least for the moment from his ‘delight in reading about the deeds of the ancients or in discussing those of the moderns.’ ‘Everything has been transformed into tender thoughts,’ he wrote, or his enthusiasms newly revealed, and even to himself.¹

Whoever she was as she captured him in her graceful ‘nets of gold woven by Venus,’ she was not at all like the saucier *La Riccia*, who complained that he made a nuisance of himself by hanging about her house: ‘she calls me her “House Pest.”’² Nor had she been discovered in his familiar circle of Florentine prostitutes. They might, for instance, enjoy seeing an acquaintance tricked into paying for some stranger having sex with a sly teenage boy up a dark alley, a *Decameron*-like escapade that, on hearing about it, he found hilarious. Neither, however, was she apt to refuse a gift of ‘blue woollen yarn for a pair of hose,’ which he asked Vettori to send him in early December 1514.

By 31 January 1515 he had begun to complain that ‘you will realize to what extent that little thief, Love, has gone in order to bind me with his fetters.’ He wove another ironic and moving sonnet into this letter, portraying love as a ‘youthful archer’ who has often ‘tried/to wound me in the breast with his arrows.’ He has finally ‘let one fly’ with such force ‘that I still feel its painful wound.’

Still, his personal contradictions amused him: ‘Anyone who might see our letters, honourable *compare*,’ he told Vettori, ‘and see their variety, would be greatly astonished, because at first it would seem that we were serious men completely directed towards weighty matters and that no thought could cascade through our heads that did not have within it probity and magnitude. But later, upon turning the page, it would seem to the reader that we – still the very same selves – were petty, fickle, lascivious, and were directed toward chimerical matters.’

Their shifts were only natural, however: ‘If to some this behaviour seems contemptible, to me it seems laudable because we are imitating nature.’ Nature, like *Fortuna*, is always ‘changeable, [and] whoever imitates nature cannot be censured.’³ To prove the point, he at once changes the subject, or shifts away from love to his usual exasperated quest for work, either with the Medici or the Pope, or Vettori’s brother Paolo. Paolo had lately been visiting Lorenzo de’Medici in Florence.

Despite himself, too, he scarcely ignored political and military questions in any ultimate sense. His value as an analyst remained in demand. Francesco Vettori was discreetly asked by Cardinal Giuliano de’Medici (as was revealed to Machiavelli only that December) to obtain his estimate of a contemplated Vatican alliance with Spain as opposed to France, or with either as opposed to remaining neutral. Machiavelli’s lengthy and unpaid-for examination of the alternatives ran to several thousand words. It concluded with his describing neutrality as the least attractive of the three, and repeating in his aphoristic way a few of his ideas advanced in *The Prince*: ‘A league of many leaders against one is hard to achieve and, once achieved, is hard to preserve’; ‘There is nothing more necessary for a prince when interacting with his subjects, his allies or his neighbours than not to be hated or despised by them’; ‘Pope Julius II never gave any heed to being hated, provided that he was feared and respected’; and ‘It is better to lose everything gallantly than to lose a part ignominiously.’ To choose and join, he argued, would always prove more useful than to stand aside, or to speculate and hope.⁴

It may have been at this time too, or in 1514, that he turned once more to his unfinished *terza rima* history of modern Florence. He worked up parts of his *Decennale Secondo*, or some 216 lines, prolonging his chronicle of the Republic's 'tragic' drift towards failure from where he had left off in 1504. It now took him into 'the lofty ... and insane actions that in ten succeeding years have occurred since, falling silent, I laid down my pen.' The defeat of Pisa ('a stubborn enemy, yet by necessity compelled and conquered') was now permitted to anticipate Pope Julius's assault on Faenza. 'The King of the Christians' capture of Lombardy was allowed to incite the Emperor Maximilian's devastation of weak, defensive armies at Padua and Treviso.

Here again, though, or on reaching the year 1509, his poetic account faded into silence, just when it seemed to be slouching towards the disaster that would overwhelm the Florentine Republic in 1512.⁵ The reason may have been twofold. On the one hand, he had returned to his more ambitious *Discorsi*. On the other, and assisting him, was a refreshing improvement of his professional life. He had for some time been welcomed as a respected and popular member of regular and remarkable gatherings of a major part of the Florentine literary intelligentsia.

Their meetings took place in the sprawling, practically suburban estate of Cosimo Rucellai (*d.*1519), remnants of which can still be found along the eponymous street named for his father, the bookish Bernardo, or at a decent stroll from the Palazzo della Signoria. Sliced up and truncated at number eight, or opposite the American Church built in 1911 by J.P. Morgan, the plush Rucellai gardens, then termed the Orti Oricellari, were enchanting for their tall, exotic, ancient trees, and already well known for the Pantheon degli Accademici Neoplatonici, a recently disbanded Platonic-Aristotelian discussion group that seems to have been located in the airy palace built here along neo-Albertian lines, if not by Alberti himself, in 1482. In the gardens of the Rucellai some of the most advanced political ideas of the day, among them questions about Lorenzo de' Medici's increasingly absolutist government, were hotly if unobtrusively taken up and debated.⁶

In these exclusive, green precincts too, Machiavelli began to test his insights for Books Two and Three of his commentaries on Livy. He read them out before an audience that would have included, in addition to the sickly, cheerful, rich Cosimo, whose servants lugged him about in a cradle-like chair, other friends of the Medici, no matter that they yearned for political liberty, such as the young Zanobi Buondelmonti, to whom later, along with Cosimo, the *Discorsi* would be

dedicated, and Piero Alamanni, a poet with a naïve desire to write in the style of Virgil's *Georgics*.

Machiavelli's commentaries followed, as before, out of his premise, often restated, that 'all affairs of this world are in motion and will not remain fixed.' They stressed his view of politics, history and the universe as continuous processes: 'Human affairs are always in motion and will consequently either rise or fall'; 'Human appetites are insatiable because nature gives us the ability and will to desire everything, while *Fortuna* gives us the ability to acquire only a little,' with the result a 'continuous discontent in the minds of men, and dissatisfaction with the things that they possess.'⁷

Social and religious issues were hardly ignored: 'If the world seems to have become effeminate, and heaven disarmed, this doubtless arises more from the cowardice of men who have interpreted our religion [Christianity] through the prism of indolence, and not through that of skill [*virtú*] and valour [as had been the case in pagan Rome]'; 'The liberality with which the Romans used to grant the privileges of citizenship to strangers ... [led them] ... to exercise so great an influence in the elections that it sensibly changed the government, and caused ... Quintilian Fabius, who was Censor at that time ... [to confine them] to such narrow limits [that] they should not corrupt all Rome' – his purpose being to allow these 'strangers' or outsiders to be absorbed into the state and to remain even as the state was in the end 'sensibly' changed.'⁸

The calm of the gardens contrasted with the busy city beyond their walls. In June 1514, in the Piazza della Signoria, Machiavelli might have witnessed a staged hunt involving lions, bears, leopards, bulls, buffaloes, stags, other wild game and horses. Platforms and corrals were erected at enormous expense in the *piazza* to accommodate the crowds and animals.

In the audience six masked cardinals from Rome, among them the Pope's nephew, Cibo, who had sneaked off to Florence for a few days, paid as much for their tickets as did forty thousand others. Many had walked from as far as Milan and Venice. Jousts took place at the Piazza di Santa Croce, with sixteen armed riders tilting for two prizes, or *pali*, in gold and silver brocade. One was thrust through, fell off his horse and died. At the *piazza*, lions were co-mingled with bears in a large wooden box, and to everyone's surprise refused to fight. A female lion defended a bear when a male lion attacked it.⁹

Other signs of vitality were abundant: on 30 November 1515, Pope Leo X arrived in Florence on an official triumph. The jaunty rich among the citizens,

dressed in purple silk softened with miniver collars, carrying small silver lances and followed by a gilt supporting cast on horseback, stepped out to meet him. Leo drew up before one of the embellished city gates with scores of his German infantry wielding double-bladed, French-style axes, mounted bowmen and squares of musketeers. Arrayed beneath a lavish canopy, or *baldacchino*, he was hoisted off to the *Duomo*, surrounded by lit torches lining the streets as far as the entrance and inside up to the High Altar.

An even better impression of his power and wealth could have been had from noting the aesthetic energy poured into the whirlwind of decorations made for his visit. Triumphal arches and silvered-over columns adorned the streets, their pilasters, statues, cornices, bannerettes and painted porticos conceived and executed by the best, and best paid, local artists, among them some echoing designs of Filippo Brunelleschi, with air-borne aureoles displaying saints and goddesses amid cherubs and clouds.

Leo responded to this joyful welcome with his own largesse, tossing money into the crowds packing the public spaces and hailing and blessing them.¹⁰

Not everyone was thrilled, though, and from another point of view it could have been observed that the quasi-rebellious if subdued atmosphere of the Rucellai gardens reflected Machiavelli's disillusionment in failing to find employment with Lorenzo de' Medici. Even if he seemed no longer to nurture the family's previous hostility towards the former Second Secretary, it seemed impossible to win more than a nod of recognition from his mighty, ennobled, sacred, fatty and rich uncle, the Pope, who had till now ignored his appeals.

Literary Adventures

Over the next few months, silences gathered between his letters. ‘*Fortuna* has left me nothing but my family and my friends,’ he wrote from Florence on 19 November 1515 to his cousin Giovanni Vernacci, who had become a close confidant, ‘and I make capital out of them.’ His situation had scarcely improved by 15 February of the following year, or as he informed Vernacci, ‘I have become useless to myself, to my family and to my friends because my doleful fate has willed it to be so... . All I have left is my own good health and that of my family.’

This was not quite true, though his sense of desolation had perhaps deepened. By now he had switched much of his energy into writing, with a good deal of it concentrated on treachery and related themes – pretence, dishonesty, deception and the mocking tones of satire – as might perhaps have been expected.

He had also become touchy about the indifference sometimes shown him by more prominent authors. On 17 December 1517 he enquired of Ludovico Alamanni about his famous friend Ludovico Ariosto and his *Orlando*. Its first edition was published in Ferrara in April 1516, and Machiavelli may have met the poet in Rome during his visit there some years earlier, or in Florence: Ariosto had arrived in the city on the day of his own release from prison. He now added, ‘Lately I have been reading Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*; the entire poem is really fine and many passages are marvellous. If he is [in Rome] with you, give him my regards and tell him that my only complaint is that in his mention of so many poets he has left me out like some prick, and that he has done to me in his *Orlando* what I shall not do to him in my *Ass*.¹

In fact he sought no revenge in his *Ass*, and the absence of Machiavelli’s name from Ariosto’s list in his *Orlando* of a number of highly regarded if today neglected Italian Renaissance poets was not reciprocated in the perhaps unfinished, more than one-thousand-line-long *Dell’Asino* (The Ass; an erroneous retitling of it as ‘The Golden Ass’ came about later), on which he may just then have been working. A fascinating, lengthy poem, which in his lifetime was to

remain unpublished, *The Ass* delivers up a schizophrenic-seeming story that sails off in several directions at once. This may be why it leaves the impression among many readers of never having been finished, though he may have considered it done, and may even have shown it about or read it at one of the banquets held in the Rucellai gardens.

Tenderness, affection and a lush sensuality, each streaming through a magical love story influenced by Dante, alternate here with satirical scenes based on Apuleius – specifically, his second-century *Transformations* (or *The Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*) of *Lucius Apuleius* – as when the narrator announces in the first few lines that he has endured much ‘grief’ while living as an ass, but then fails to fill us in, as promised, on how his dramatic alteration came about.

Vistas displaying gloomy assemblies of large, dilapidated animals, among them a mass of tired and rug-like lions, who seem post-human, or not at all like the alert horses and pigs of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, lumber past, immersed in an existentialist, Circean twilight and hinting at a fulfilled wish, or so the poem implies, to revert to their original beast-like condition, even if Machiavelli’s hirsute specimens seem somewhat tongue-tied. In Chapter 8, this zoo-like enigma is resolved by a philosophical if undemonstrative hog. He winds up Machiavelli’s mock epic, or as much of it as exists, by revelling in his rejection of his former humanity. He avers that he is better off than any human being ‘because in this mud I live more happily;/here without anxiety I bathe and roll about.’²

It should be noted, however, that Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* (the ‘golden’ refers to the author’s orotund, professional Latin style and not to the precious metal) seems deliberately diffuse in its organization, images and meanings. It evokes a plethora of confused implications. The question arises whether Machiavelli has not also aimed at producing a puzzle; whether in fabricating a poem whose theme is escape from human conflicts he has not invented a clear mirror of some of the most common human perplexities.

During this period he seems as well to have written some now lost *gesta*, or entertaining, moralistic tales. The modern short story, while loosely descended from their medieval and Renaissance prototype, differs greatly from the *gesta* in plot, psychology and characterization. To judge from Machiavelli’s sole surviving example, however, his own *gesta* or *favole* cannot have been moral in any conventional way.

Belfagor, often referred to as *Il demonio che prese moglie* (The devil who took a wife), seems a product of these years, or between 1515 and 1519. It only barely resembles Boccaccio's tales in *The Decameron*, and is surely not a novella, or not in the modern sense, but edges closer to its more florid medieval forebears. Populated with stock characters – frightened and frightening devils who seem as pagan as Christian, an obnoxious wife, a tricky, opportunistic peasant – it also cannot be understood as autobiographical, or as implicating Machiavelli's marriage, as some readers have suggested. Despite a few blips here and there, his marriage apparently continued amid expressions of affection on both sides.

In *Belfagor*, Pluto, the ruler of the underworld, decides to investigate a claim that most of the souls of men condemned to the flames of Hell have been driven to sinning by their insatiable wives. An arch-devil, Belfagor, is fitted out with money, princely good looks and a trip to Florence to find out the truth. He is told to locate a suitable woman, marry her and live with her for ten years. He adopts the name Roderigo, disguises himself as a merchant and succeeds in marrying Onestà, whose beauty is undeniable. Because of her incessant demands, which he feels unable to refuse, he is soon plunged into monumental debt and faces bankruptcy.

In flight from enraged creditors, he is hidden in a dung-heap by a peasant, Gianmatteo, to whom he promises money in exchange for protection. When Gianmatteo asks him to keep his word, however, Roderigo tells him that he will do so by entering someone's body – he quickly takes possession of another man's wife – and arranging that Gianmatteo handle her exorcism for a fee. This he does, and money is made. Roderigo's next target is the daughter of the King of Naples. Her exorcism brings in 50,000 ducats. This is more than enough for Gianmatteo, who by now wants only to go home and spend what he has earned.

He has not, however, reckoned on Roderigo's enjoyment of these acts of possession, and is horrified to learn that the daughter of King Louis VII of France is now also possessed. With his reputation for exorcism growing by leaps and bounds, Gianmatteo is expected to rescue her too, or face execution. Terrified, he agrees, but then sets about tricking the trickster-devil. On a platform before Notre Dame in Paris he arranges a ceremonial exorcism for the King's daughter. At a pre-arranged moment he orders a crowd of nobles and musicians to make crunching and crashing sounds on musical instruments. Roderigo wonders what all the noise can be about, but Gianmatteo says that it announces the imminent arrival of his wife. Aghast, Roderigo races back to hell, and there '[bears] witness to the ills that wives [bring] on a house, while

Gianmatteo, who [has] outwitted the devil, [travels] back home a cheerful man.³

Machiavelli's story has spawned a number of dramatic and literary adaptations: Respighi turned it into an opera, Pirandello into a modernistic poem. It is also nothing new. The sexist plot is traceable to a venerable Indian story collection, the *Sukasaptati*, probably introduced into Europe by the invading Mongols under Genghis Khan (c.1162–1227), or long before Machiavelli transposed it to Florence.

The tale's interest thus lies not in some indictment of marriage – an absurdity suggested only by Belfagor, even if his wife turns out to be no bargain – but in a reenactment of the age-old jest type, found in many *favole* and *fabliaux*, which shows a peasant trading the devil. A greater attraction lies in the smoothness of Machiavelli's style.

A contradiction between the disreputable passions on display and Machiavelli's softening of them through civilized phrases creates many delicious echoes. The retold folktale invokes a euphoria of antiquity. An Indian afternoon turns into a Florentine evening as modern connections dispute with the temporal fixations of history: 'A miraculous change came upon Roderigo when he heard the word "wife." The change was so momentous that he gave no thought to whether it was even possible or a reasonable assumption that his wife could have come, and without another word, he fled in terror, releasing the young princess.'⁴

By 1518 too, if not perhaps several years before, Machiavelli had also committed himself to playwriting, and with success. In retrospect this alternative career seems natural enough to him, though at first it may have amounted only to a diversion. Like other Italian and European Renaissance cities, Florence had no professional acting troupes. It had no buildings intended as theatres (Palladio's Olympia in Vicenza, probably the first, dates from 1565) and only mysterious Roman ruins to remind the curious of an ancient theatrical history that few knew much about.

Many, however, enjoyed their memories of sacred, biblically based medieval plays, which were often revived. Theatrical experiments, too, whether read or acted out in religious or noble houses, or in academic settings, stimulated an avid popular interest in drama.

Pope Leo's glittering welcome might easiest have been understood as complementing the established tradition of court masques. The rediscovered plays

of Seneca nurtured a modern interest in tragedy, though their soaring heroics seemed alien to the tastes of ordinary audiences.

The obscene plays of Plautus and Terence, however, dug into the customs of taverns, warehouses, streets and the tradesman's life. Their stock characters – the cheating servant, the ridiculous aged husband, the love-crazed youth, to cite Machiavelli's descriptions of them – fed a more general pleasure taken in comedy. Terence had concentrated on comedies of manners. Plautus had taken as his realm Rome's swashbuckling brothels.

Machiavelli had copied out plays of Terence in his mid-twenties, and so knew them well. In his recent discourse on language he had announced his theatrical intentions. A comedy ought to hold up 'a mirror to domestic life ... with a certain urbanity and with expressions which excite laughter, so that the [people] who come eagerly to enjoy themselves taste afterwards the useful lesson that lay underneath.'⁵

His *The Woman of Andros*, an adaptation of Terence's *Andria*, may date from as late as 1517. In rewriting the ancient Roman drama of baffled young love, he was working against a well-known academic current of Latin humanist comedies. Termed *commedie erudite*, their popularity spanned the fifteenth century and included such plays as Pier Paolo Vergerio's *Paolus* (c.1390), *Chrysis* (1444) by Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, who later became Pope Pius II, and Tommaso Medio's *Epirota* (1483).⁶

Machiavelli was thus already a playwright of some repute by the time, most likely in 1518, he produced his single indubitable masterpiece, which would act as a catalyst in the development of modern drama, *La Mandragola* (The Mandrake). As now seems evident, his lost *Eunuchus*, another adaptation of Terence, his *Aululia*, a recasting of a comedy by Plautus, and yet another lost play, *Le Maschere* (The Masks, an original satire in which he supposedly raked familiar public figures over some fairly hot coals), all praised by those who saw them, may have been written and put on as many as ten or more years earlier.

But put on how? If not a lot is known about his or anyone else's early productions, it seems clear that by 1518 major artists had become as fascinated with the idea of creating theatrical illusions as were the actors and playwrights. The earliest-known revolving stage was invented by Leonardo in 1490. It offered audiences a puffy *papier-maché* mountain that split and shivered apart to reveal the play in progress.⁷ Important artists such as Bastiano da San Gallo and Andrea del Sarto painted sets for early performances of Machiavelli's

Mandragola, with backdrops showing three-dimensional illusions of streets and interiors.

Costumes, which had seemed plain and inconsequential at the academic readings held in universities, were now enhanced. Masks and disguises all at once became as *de rigueur* as illusion itself (what, after all, was real?). Acting styles shed their bombastic lumps and exaggerated tics for naturalistic gestures: a duel might actually resemble a fight to the death.

An old theatrical war-horse, windy declamation, or inflated phrases and pompous outbursts, subsided into the more convincing succulence of everyday speech. A significant shift along these lines, at which Machiavelli excelled, involved dialogue. In his hands, it not only sounded like the real thing but became pitch perfect.

Other innovations, if not his own but improved by him over what was on tap in plays by such as Ariosto, had to do with characterization and theme. Stock characters were retained, but Machiavelli enriched them with contradictions. Triteness was endowed with the complexities of living people.

Other devices of ancient Roman comedy, such as sprinkling tricks, japes and ironies with puns and lies, gathered into a more credible atmosphere of unceasing betrayal and treachery. *The Mandragola* was among the first of what may be termed the modern comedies of treachery. Loops of deceit, which left no one innocent, emerged as risible and charming rather than humiliating and menacing. Their final effect was one of paradoxical happiness, in which an audience might discover the pleasures of self-recognition.

In *The Mandragola*, these innovations are flattered by a sassy wit. Nicia, the beautiful Lucrezia's oafish husband, who yearns for an heir, is presented not simply as a typical lecher whose age renders him an apt and satisfying target for catcalls, but also as a lawyer capable of social commentary: 'These damned doctors couldn't find your gizzard if you dangled it before their eyes'; 'In Florence if you're not in with the ruling party, you can't even get a dog to bark at you.'⁸

The Friar, a well-known type usually depicted as all flab and corruption, is here spruced up as a greedy apologist for clerical weakness: 'It's not our fault! We've not done a good job of keeping the church's reputation going.'⁹

Callimaco, Lucrezia's lust-driven lover, an example of the moonstruck idiom-type, is allowed shrewdness and a chance to anticipate his own confusion: 'I have been seized by such a desire to be with her that I shall go mad.'¹⁰

Lucrezia, to whom another corrupt priest has proposed that drinking a

pointless potion of mandrake juice will allow her to become pregnant, is suspicious of everyone: 'Of all the things we have tried, this seems to me the strangest.'¹¹

Ligurio, a retired matchmaker and a recognizable image of duplicity, coolly observes that 'men in love have quicksilver feet,' but is then permitted to comment on the growing climate of betrayal and camouflage in which fool is tricked by fool: 'We'll all be in disguise.'¹²

As Nicia is duped into assisting at the bedding of Callimaco and his own wife, going so far as to lock the door on them at night and offer them the key the next day, Machiavelli's ironic final scenes perpetuate the marital treachery while converting it into a delight that embraces Nicia himself. Lucrezia may rationalize her ethically dubious joy with her new lover as 'Heaven's will,' but what the play ultimately makes fun of – and audiences more than warmed to the idea – is the futility of applying strict ethical formulas to human behaviour. Life and experience are likely to make nonsense of them.

Machiavelli himself offered no apologies for his play's veritable gush of paradoxes. In his Prologue he candidly alludes to his, or, as he puts it, the Author's, hardships as he speaks of wanting to come up with a comedy which would 'lighten his misery, for he has nowhere else to turn, barred as he is from demonstrating his skills and abilities through worthier tasks, his labour no longer prized.'¹³

One act of treachery may deserve another, it seems, or at least a stunning play showing how treachery operates on the domestic level. As a bonus, it may also demonstrate how on occasion treachery may work for the common good.

Reflecting on the Craft of War

A series of coincidental deaths among his military-minded acquaintances, friends and enemies during those years spurred his reflections on the *arte*, or more accurately, the craft, of war.

Louis XII of France died of dysentery on 1 January 1515. He was succeeded by Francis I. The Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian died at Wels (not Linz, as Guicciardini thought¹) in early 1519, ‘intent,’ as the Florentine historian reliably puts it, on ‘hunting wild beasts,’ as was his habit. Closer to home, Cosimo Rucellai, the benefactor of Machiavelli’s conversations at the Orti Oricellari and just twenty seven, also died in 1519. A respected nobleman and *condottiere*, Fabrizio Colonna, a visitor at the Rucellai gardens, where Machiavelli probably came to know him, died in 1520.

Lorenzo de’Medici, the egotistical twenty-five-year-old ruler of Florence, died of tuberculosis worsened by syphilis in April 1519. This was a few days after the death following childbirth of his French wife.² Though few mourned his death, and despite Machiavelli’s rededicating *The Prince* to him after the death of his uncle, Giuliano, it paved the way for revisions of the city’s constitution, or a more sensitive leadership under Cardinal Giulio de’Medici. He had arrived in Florence and taken charge of affairs before news of Lorenzo’s death was bruited about, thus ensuring that ‘there was no unrest.’

The quasi-original conception of *L’Arte della Guerra* (usually translated as *The Art of War*) apparently occurred to Machiavelli in 1520, after the deaths of his two friends, Cosimo Rucellai, ‘whom I never remember without tears in my eyes,’ and Fabrizio Colonna.³ The book presents a fictional dialogue between them in what remained the fashionable manner for investigating philosophical subjects, such as free will, though Machiavelli-*cum*-Colonna here deals with the problems of war and militarism from a good many practical angles.

The dialogue is set in the Rucellai gardens during a single afternoon back in 1516, or well before his friends’ deaths. Fabrizio has just returned ‘from

Lombardy, where he has commanded his Catholic Majesty's [or the new Spanish Emperor Charles V's] forces' – this bit is no fiction – and is invited to show off his expertise on matters military before reporting to the Pope in Rome. Cosimo has 'long wished to hear [these matters] thoroughly discussed,' as have a number of his 'intimate friends,' among them Machiavelli.⁴

Even now *The Art of War* exerts a considerable influence on the history of ideas, and not simply because it is the only one of Machiavelli's major works to be published in his lifetime, in 1521. Its several minor deficiencies, or the not really crippling errors scattered among its seven chapters, are also easily identified. They seem attributable to the skewed conclusions that he may have arrived at as a result of his still somewhat limited war experience, though he cites the fact that he has never served as a soldier as providing him with independence of judgement.

He seems too flippantly dismissive, for instance, of the use of small arms or arquebuses in battle. He is equally dismissive of the advantages of cavalry, no doubt because he had seen almost nothing of massive cavalry attacks, though he knew quite a bit about the relative helplessness of small cavalry units sent out against disciplined infantry armed with pikes and swords. Some of the book's blemishes may also be due to changing military conditions, as when Colonna (or Machiavelli) pronounces himself unable to find much to praise in concentrated artillery fire. Artillery was just then coming into its own in a new way as commanders learned how to apply it against infantry in the field rather than only against town and castle walls. In each of these cases, however, rapid technical improvements, leading to increases in the numbers of weapons and more and better trained mounted men, would soon prove crucial to victories straight across the Continent.

It also goes without saying that Machiavelli and his contemporaries understood war almost entirely from the infantry's point of view. Colonna makes no mention of naval battles, for instance, which may have seemed irrelevant. Nonetheless, and while misjudging artillery, he displays a certain flexibility as he concedes that the pre-artillery battlefield methods of the ancient Roman general Scipio would be inadequate in the face of the reloading and refiring of heavy modern weapons.

The ghosts of ancient Roman soldiers, strategists and engineers haunt *The Art of War*, as might be expected, given Machiavelli's humanist values. A more telling reason for their presiding over the various chapters, though, lies in his implacable persuasion of Roman military greatness, or the streak of Roman

victories running through the Republican period and continuing into that of the Caesars and their successors (Augustus had seized much of central and northern Europe: Vespasian had added vast territories in England and Germany). It made no difference that corruption and selfish passions had by then eroded many naturally generous motives and moulded into dictatorial ambitions.

Roman and Greek ideas of war had a lot to teach the modern soldier, or so he felt, and not only by comparison. The diverse sections are thus peppered with ancient military data, together with diagrams, and focus on such topics as Greek and Roman as well as recent arms and armour, battle formations, the size of armies, marching styles, choosing camp sites, pitching tents, managing 'military' women, restricting gambling, the quantities of troops necessary for engagements, fortifying towns, obtaining horses and preparing ambushes.

His primary source is the fourth-century *De re militari* (On the Military Question) of Vegetius, though he resorts to other authorities such as Polybius. He copies out chapter and verse as he needs them. While much of this material retains a fascination on antiquarian grounds, it would be a mistake to ignore the forest for the trees, or to scant his book's original features. These dominate everything else and consist in his grasp, in advance of other analysts, of the inevitable relationship between politics and war, his insights into the value of militias to the survival of the state, as opposed to standing armies, and his realization of the importance of military discipline to the political as well as the military education of entire populations.⁵

In respect to these issues alone, *The Art of War* may be said to continue to affect if not actually alter history, as is evidenced by the continuing attention focused on the book in military academies, and the strategic dreams – or nightmares – of significant political-military leaders of recent decades, among them Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, along with democratically elected ministers and presidents.

Unexpectedly perhaps, Machiavelli almost at once voices his opposition to the militarization of society. He insists on the greater need of a well-grounded civilian government. Any army, he believes, ought to be the servant of its state. Dangerous to the state's survival, moreover, is some division between its political and military leaders, as will occur when its army is led by professional soldiers who view soldiering and war as occupations or businesses.⁶

The result, as witnessed in the more despairing annals of ancient history, or for that matter those of Italy in recent times, will be political weakness keeling

over into collapse. War, he argues, as would Karl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), himself an avid reader of his *Art of War* some centuries later, is without exception politics expressed by other means. Even the most pointless-seeming violence, if protracted, assumes the patterns of a political policy.⁷

Machiavelli's uncovering the relations between political and military tugs and pulls should also be understood as pointing to the superiority of militias over standing armies. In pressing home this idea he ironically shows himself in sympathy with those who suspected him of disloyalty to the Florentine Republic when years earlier he had urged the establishment of a citizen militia, and who worried lest an armed citizenry should stage (in the modern sense) a *Putsch*.

A *Putsch* or *coup d'état*, he (or Colonna) suggests, is far more likely to emanate from a standing army than from native-born troops holding jobs or careers apart from soldiering, and who will be apt to be sent home after their battles and wars. The *ad hoc* nature of a citizen militia guarantees its commitment to peaceful politics as opposed to *putschist* treachery.

In teasing out this conviction Machiavelli seems in important ways to anticipate the military policies of modern democracies, whose armies may consist of both small standing and large militia-type units, but the vast majority of whose soldiers are conscripted for limited tours of duty. Again he here insists on the superiority of the civilian to any military government: 'A well-ordered kingdom must avoid the soldierly profession ... since those men corrupt the king [or any other type of ruler] and are the ministers of tyranny.'⁸

A major theme, already sounded in *The Prince* and the *Discorsi*, is that any healthy state ought to arrange its politics and soldiering so that they flow back and forth into each other in complementary currents. The life of the soldier and that of the citizen should blend and merge for the sake of the tranquil preservation of both.

These arguments lead into his somewhat surprising conclusion that military discipline is fundamental not only to the success of any army but to the education of the non-military surrounding population of citizens. His reason here is that military-style discipline, if exported into the outside social world, can provide an essential paradigm of education in civil courage and social responsibility.⁹

Such a policy may stimulate patriotism (or, somewhat later, nationalism), while any failure to nurture patriotic sentiments is likely to lead to a social implosion and military defeat. The social uses of military discipline, however,

should not be confused with the military domination of society, which is to be avoided.

To illustrate these principles, he recalls that ‘the dreadful alarms, the disgraceful defeats and the astonishing losses ... sustained [by Italian forces] in 1494’ ‘resulted from the [poor quality] of their military discipline.’ An ‘ancient discipline [ought now to] be reintroduced among raw, honest men’ by princes who refuse to debase their armies’ morale and confidence by spending ‘their time in wanton dalliance and lascivious pleasures, [maintaining] a haughty kind of state, [humiliating] their subjects ... [and disposing] of their military honours and preferments to pimps and parasites.’¹⁰

Probably the most innovative of his ideas lies in his promotion of a quantificational approach to setting up military organizations. The proper arrangements of troops, armies, battles, ammunition and weapons are or should be reducible to numbers, equations, designs (as of military units) and statistics. The challenge of training and deploying an army, he implies, can be converted into an exact science, or form of engineering. Any calculation of an army’s supplies, for instance, should be based on an estimate of available social resources. Military calculations can thus help to ensure the survival of civil politics.

He refrains from applying the quantificational approach himself, however, with the exception of his introduction of it into a few camp designs and battle-field suggestions.¹¹ Instead, and despite his stress on discipline and a view of armies as marvellously efficient because perfectly organized machines, he is apparently willing to leave to others the development of military science. His interest in it seems to be satisfied by his establishing the principle of quantification. It unquestionably enhanced his book’s popularity. A second edition appeared in 1529, with translations into Spanish, French and English following over the next forty years.

He may also have been exceedingly busy. He addressed his Preface to *The Art of War* to Lorenzo di Filippo Strozzi (1482–1549), a wealthy young nobleman whom he may have met at the Rucellai gatherings, and who had done him some unspecified favours and was acquainted with Giulio de’Medici. The contact could not have been more helpful. Where until now various official doors had been shut they seemed to fly open. As early as 21 April 1520, Battista della Palla, a friend and Rucellai regular, a dialogue-participant in *The Art of War* and an intermediary of sorts between Giulio and the Pope, wrote that he had ‘found [the Pope] very well disposed towards you.’

The popularity of *La Mandragola*, with its promise of sexy pleasures, had appealed to Leo's hedonistic temperament. Despite his myopia and billowy stoutness, he remained an ardent playgoer and voluptuary, if a mediocre writer. In view of Machiavelli's historical and literary achievements, it seemed that Leo might be interested in 'commissioning [him] to do some writing,' and here may be a first reference to what would become a valuable invitation: he might be asked to take on the challenge of doing a new history of Florence. After years of neglect and indifference, he might even begin to enjoy a measure of official approval.

His play, especially, seems to have worked as a catalyst. Its cheering Florentine reception had led Leo to order a separate Roman production, arranged by Battista. Leo's idea was to make himself better acquainted with what Battista called 'your intelligence and judgement' ('I spoke of your comedy, telling him that it is all ready'), or at least to learn more about his potential historian.¹²

Machiavelli was now busy in another way as well, and it too may have caught Leo's eye. To make money, he accepted commissions taking him into nearby cities such as Genoa to settle bankruptcy and other financial claims, chiefly on behalf of people whom he knew. His abilities as a negotiator had thus begun to prove modestly lucrative. The summer of 1520 found him in Lucca, nudging away for the Salviati at a bankruptcy problem involving Michele Guinigi. This too meant assisting a member of the Pope's family.

His Lucca commission lasted for several months, or into early September. It left him with time on his hands, and he at once set about turning it into a literary-historical opportunity which might also have brought him closer to the Pope and the Medici: the chance to produce a several-thousand-word-long sketch of the life of the medieval Luccan commander Castruccio Castracani (1281–1328), a well-known military hero who had once soundly defeated Florence while ravaging the Florentine countryside.¹³

It is fair to say that for sheer strangeness and beauty, and despite some uneven patches, Machiavelli's account of Castruccio's life has few equals in the history of biographical propaganda. And how else except as propaganda to understand his extravagant treatment of Castruccio's life? On the one hand, Machiavelli idealizes an historically remote soldier, whose rise from squalor seems as abrupt as his lapse into an excruciating death. On the other, he takes care, even to the point of wild inventions, to make the right impression on his possible employer in Rome. Following on from a quasi-mythical opening, his fantasy consists of a utopian cameo-history of the hero and his era. A good deal

of both seems intended to provide some surprising ethical lessons along a rocky road.

A more appropriate way to see his *Life*, however, may lie in accepting as more than a coincidence the fact that he produced it and sent it off to his friends within a few years of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516, in Latin). More's book, which also came out in Florence in 1519, was most likely known to him. The time in any case continued to be receptive to utopias and satires, as had been the case with the tales of Till Eulenspiegel. Machiavelli's life of Castruccio is no satire, but its utopian features may easily lead the modern reader into discovering in him the portrait of an ideal, heroic, controversial prince, à la Cesare Borgia. Here, however, a problem emerges: his biographer's heroic values differ from almost any recent ones. The modern reader quickly runs into trouble, for instance, over the seeming contradiction that while the *Life* deplores militarism, it appears to endorse military violence, and even huge gobs of it.

Castruccio starts off a bit like Moses, as a foundling 'wrapped in leaves.' He is raised in Lucca by a priest and his childless sister. He acquires his military training from their friend, 'a fine gentleman of the Guinigi family' (a detail that falsely connects him to the Medici). His instructor notices that Castruccio's martial skills far surpass those of other boys.¹⁴ At eighteen, or during his first military campaign, he exhibits 'so much prudence and courage' that he becomes famous through 'all of Lombardy.' The death of Guinigi, however, who has named him his estate manager and guardian of his thirteen-year-old son, provokes slanderous attacks on Castruccio by influential and jealous men who believe that he has his 'mind set on tyranny.'

A slew of battles, leading to victories, ambushes, defeats and additional victories, swirls about him through the next exhausting stages of his life. A pattern is established in which he is betrayed, taken prisoner, liberated, returned as a 'prince of Lucca' and again betrayed, imprisoned and released. Routs, maimings, shrieks, kidnappings, explosions and shootings accompany the deaths of up to 'ten thousand men' per day. The elephantine numbers of deaths plump out a stew of implausible adventures.

Throughout all these disturbances, too – and herein may lie the modern rub – Castruccio betrays his own men (and women) right and left. The innocent are sacrificed with the guilty, allies as casually as enemies. An odour of sanctimonious slaughter is unmistakable, as is his indifference to human values.¹⁵

Can anyone so monstrous be a hero? In Machiavelli's implied affirmative answer to this question is to be found a dramatic masterstroke. It redeems by

contrast what has come before, and even projects his biography beyond the limitations of taste of his day. As Castruccio lies dying – *Fortuna* strikes him down with an illness (also *à la* Cesare Borgia?) at the age of forty-four – he makes his confession, but in it takes note not so much of his evil acts, which are well known, as his guilt in committing them. He does so, moreover, not from some idea of religious convenience but in a spirit of complete contrition.

As he bares his soul, the reader's sympathy may be oddly startled. The sense of a divine power guiding the hand of justice, as if – amazingly – amid a flight of angels, is strangely awakened. To Pagolo Guinigi, whose guardian Castruccio has remained and to whom he leaves his conquered cities – or Lucca, Pisa and Pistoia (in this fictional account) – he bequeaths the plausible reflection that 'in this world it is vital to know oneself'.

The Dream of History

Machiavelli's contract for the new Florentine history, officially for Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, came through in the autumn of 1520. He had proposed his own terms, and these were sent on to the university or *Studio* officials in Florence. The Pope was the *Studio's* head and Francesco del Nero, his own brother-in-law, its chief administrator.

His fee, which he did not specify, turned out to be not much, '100 *fiorini di studio*,' slightly over half what he had been paid when he served in the chancery; eventually, in 1525, it was doubled, to '100 *ducati d'oro*'. The deadline was set for two years hence (though it was later extended to four), and his job was to write, as he put it, 'the annals or else the history of the things done by the state and city of Florence.' His historical starting point as well as his choice of language, 'either Tuscan or Latin,' was left up to him.¹

From the beginning, he appears to have known that he would write in Tuscan, but he may initially have chosen to deal only with the Republic's preceding seventy or so years. Leonardo Bruni's history, as well as that of Poggio Bracciolini, who had been Chancellor of Florence from 1453 to 1459, had ended in the 1430s. There seemed little point in repeating what they had done.

A major problem, however, with their own and others' histories, as Machiavelli observes in his Preface, was that while these earlier writers dealt competently enough with foreign affairs, they skimmed over 'civil disorders and internal enmities.' They also omitted the reasons for most domestic problems, or the currents of 'hatreds and divisions' that had driven the Republic to act as it did. From Machiavelli's point of view, they had thus omitted a good deal of the history.²

He was aware too of an irony built into his own situation: that a Medici Pope had chosen a political enemy to recount the history of his city, or someone who had devoted years of his life to toiling away on behalf of the politically opposed Florentine Republic. Precisely their opposed attitudes, however, may have

prodded Machiavelli to begin his new history more or less at the city's founding, or with a majestic overview of Italy from ancient Roman times. The contrast between the pagan older world and the Christian new one could illuminate his passionate desire to expose the long struggle into maturity of Florentine republican tendencies. After an initially broad description in fact he might concentrate on the major events between 1440 and the present. If he focused on the rivalry between republicanism and despotism, he might make a valuable and original contribution.

He planned to do most of the work at his farm in Sant'Andrea, but except for the first few months found it hard to get away. Praise for his life of Castruccio poured in from friends such as Zanobi Buondelmonti, who found it 'as dear ... as anything in the world.' Some had reservations about an anthology of often lame witticisms, falsely attributed to the hero, which Machiavelli had tacked on at the end (for example: 'Castruccio [actually Diogenes Laertius (2nd c.)] used to say that the path to hell was easy, since you went downward with your eyes shut').³ Zanobi urged him to drop his anthology and get on with the history 'because you rise higher in your style [in writing that sort of thing] than you do elsewhere, just as the material requires.'

As always, though, money mattered. He was briefly intrigued by, if led to reject, an offer to become a government secretary in Ragusa. This had come his way through Piero Soderini. His friend and employer was now thriving across the Adriatic. The secretarial position would have paid a handsome 200 gold ducats, plus expenses, but Machiavelli's just-accepted historian's position required him to stay put or risk a likely confiscation of his property.⁴

Another opportunity, somewhat more amusing and paradoxical, cropped up in May 1521. The government committee acting in place of his old one at the Palazzo della Signoria, but now called the *l'Otto di Pratica* (the Eight in Charge of Affairs), reaffirmed his momentary good standing in Florentine political circles, mostly because they had decided to send him on a minor official mission, his first since the fall of the Republic. The mission seemed little more than absurd, as perhaps it must have to anyone with his anti-clerical and sceptical religious attitudes. It may, however, have been offered as a partial test of his loyalty.

He was ordered to attend a Chapter General meeting at Carpi, a few score miles to the north, of the recently established group of Minorite Friars. The purpose was to urge them to sever their connections with other Tuscan Franciscans. Since 1517, when the Minorites had declared themselves in

rebellion against their own monastic order, they had pursued a devoutly reformist path. In practice this meant leading lives of prudish scorn and pomposity. As Machiavelli himself put it, they had become a 'Republic of Clogs.' Self-righteousness in sexual matters, though, had hardly prevented them from devoting themselves to luxuries, such as fine food and comfortable beds.

They represented as well a mild threat to papal control over their other Franciscan brethren, who were more renowned for cheating and fornication. To someone with Machiavelli's whorehouse-oriented cast of mind, his potential holier-than-thou Minorite hosts could merit only a sardonically raised eyebrow.

His journey to Carpi took him to Modena, giving him a chance to catch up on his friendship with Francesco Guicciardini, governor of the town. Though conservative, standoffish and often icy, he remained generally *simpatico*, taking pleasure in Machiavelli's playwriting success and sharing his dim view of the Minorites.⁵

The deeper context of this mission, however, was the spreading Reformation movement to the north, or off in a Germany that looked increasingly tempestuous. 'Lutheranism,' with its threatening emphasis on individual salvation, Bible reading in private – which perhaps more than any other force for revolutionary change was to abet the relatively new fashion in silent reading straight across Europe – and scathing denunciations of Church materialism, was resented throughout much of Italy. Its appeal had been sapped, at least for the moment, by the diversity of Italian religious life, particularly as reflected in splinter groups such as the Minorites.⁶

The Vatican, in other words, remained anxious. Harbingers of religious violence were seen everywhere, though all the important clashes had so far occurred only in Germany and farther north, in the Netherlands and Antwerp. Precautions seemed essential. The twenty-one-year-old Spanish Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, himself born in Ghent, had just attended his first bloody *auto-da-fé* in Louvain in May, or at about the time when Machiavelli arrived in Carpi.

The Reformation seems to have made no impression on him, however, and he saw the friars as simply fussy and foolish. On arriving, he discovered that they were unable to agree or disagree with his request – or the Signoria's (really the Pope's, through Cardinal Giulio de' Medici) – that they cut off contacts with other Franciscans.

As promised, his accommodations were superb. A request from the leaders of the Florentine Wool Guild, reaching him on 14 May, that he invite a popular

Minorite friar, a rousing preacher nicknamed *Rovaio* ('the north wind'), to deliver a sermon at the *Duomo* in Florence during Lent, fell on deaf ears as *Rovaio* showed no interest.

Guicciardini urged Machiavelli to wrap up the mission quickly, and wondered whether he might not be risking his honour among 'these holy friars' who could 'pass some of their hypocrisy on to you.' It could be embarrassing 'if at this age you started to think about your soul... . Since you have always lived in a contrary belief, it would be attributed rather to senility than to goodness.'

He need not have worried. Whatever Machiavelli's convictions about the soul, his honour among friars seemed in no danger: 'I was sitting on the toilet when your messenger arrived [with your letter], and just at that moment ... mulling over the absurdities of this world,' among them the rejected invitation to Fra *Rovaio*: '[The Wool Guild] would like a preacher who would teach them the way to paradise... . I should like to find one who would teach them the way to go to the Devil.'⁷ He felt not above playing a practical joke on his hosts, and asked Guicciardini to send out a few unctuous, phony messengers to bow and scrape in his presence to let him appear more impressive. This gambit produced the desired effect, but he realized that he could keep it up only in dread of being found out and exiled to some nearby ramshackle inn ('I am scared shitless' [of that]), where he would be without the 'solid meals, splendid beds and the like in which I have been recovering my strength for three days now.'⁸ In the end, he packed up and left anyway, though only after having absorbed as much as he could about Minorite regulations, information which might come in handy for his history.

At home in Florence in September, he was delighted with a letter that amounted to a rave review of his *Art of War*. The book had been brought out a month earlier, by the heirs of the well-known printer of classical texts, Filippo di Giunta, and the review was by Cardinal Giovanni Salviati, a prominent figure in Florentine political circles. His mother was Lucrezia de'Medici, the daughter of Lorenzo the Magnificent. 'You have coupled,' he wrote, 'to the most perfect manner of warfare in antiquity everything that is good in modern warfare and compounded an invincible army.'⁹

The scope of his *Istorie Fiorentine* (Florentine Histories) would be no less ambitious, and he now set seriously to work, probably at Sant'Andrea. He had with him as sources not only editions of Bruni, Poggio and Livy, but also of Piero Minerbetti (his *Cronica fiorentina*), Flavio Biondo (his *Decennali*,

purchased by his father back in 1485), Giovanni Villani (his *Cronica*), Gino Capponi and Marchionne di Coppo Stefani (for their apparently eye-witness accounts of the riots of 1378, which had led to the Medici's assumption of power) and Giovanni Cavalcanti: his own *Istorie fiorentine*, which started off in 1420, was to prove so trustworthy a guide to later events that Machiavelli more or less copied out whole chunks of it.¹⁰

His choice of Tuscan as the language in which to write would probably have struck his contemporaries as unusual for an enterprise as formal as a history. It would also have seemed exciting, as it affirmed a growing acceptance of the vernacular. A good deal more, however, seems to have been involved in his choice than catering to trendy developments. Apart from a few Florentine chronicles, which basically supplied listings of dates and events, there existed few thorough-going histories of the city. The best, by Bruni and Poggio, had been written in a stuffy, scholastic Latin, no matter how clear their style. The choice of Tuscan would thus have seemed original on historical, cultural and literary grounds.

In a remarkable passage in Book I, Machiavelli indicates that his choice also coincides with an important theme of the history itself, or with the momentous shift in language from Latin to Italian following the sack of Rome in the fifth century – this amid the reeling into collapse of the Roman empire:

One can easily imagine what Italy and the Roman dependencies must have suffered in those troublous times, in which not only the government changed, but the laws, customs, ways of living, religion, language, dress, and even names: such vicissitudes – or even any one of them singly ... – are enough to terrify the strongest and most constant soul. From these changes there arose the foundation and growth of many cities, and also the destruction of many... . Amid these troubles and changes of population there arose a new language, as is evident from the speech now prevailing in Italy or in France, and in Spain, caused by the native tongue of the new population mingling with that of the ancient Romans. Moreover the names were changed, not only of the provinces and countries, but of the lakes, rivers and seas, and also of the men themselves, for Italy and France and Spain were full of new names, and all the ancient ones were altered.¹¹

The new language had fostered the new history as much as the new history had shaped the new language. To understand the history, one would need to trace out the new culture's linguistic development, or the growing flexibility

that had enabled the new language to accommodate the most sensitive and ambitious literary expressiveness.

Dante's Italian had shaped the present as much as it had been shaped by Virgil and the past. Machiavelli's humanism required an acceptance of modern Italian culture to permit its blending with classical brilliance. Both his style and training had prepared him for the challenge. His committed empiricism, always intolerant of superfluous abstractions ('if anything in a history delights and instructs, it is that which is described in detail'¹²), might enable him to indicate the most important historical change of all: how coming along after the fall of Rome 'the strife between the customs of the ancient faith and the miracles of the new caused the greatest tumults among men,' together with the most crucial result: that *en masse* 'men living among so many persecutions began at last to carry written in their very looks the terror of their souls.'¹³

The point would be to acknowledge and take stock of the momentous modern terror. It had provoked both psychological calamities and spiritual marvels, and even new forms of compassion and ruthlessness, together with the novel Judeo-Christian brands of suffering, if not torment.

In charting the great historical change, he would also describe another phenomenon which had not been dealt with by others: the Italian fragmentation, or how 'of the many wars waged in Italy by the barbarians almost all were caused by the Popes, as it was by them that the barbarians who inundated Italy were called in, and this state of things has lasted down to our times and has kept Italy disunited and still keeps her weak.'¹⁴

So much for his approach: the modern reader may still find the history defective. Often he seems to wander, perhaps because in his haste to assemble so complex a work whose eight books describe whole centuries, as well as their battles and political conflicts, up to 1492, he often neglects to compare his sources.

Over the many pages, however, this problem ceases to matter. It becomes clear that he is embarked on an exciting investigation of an even larger theme: that of a bizarre human restlessness which, he maintains, sprang into being with the fall of Rome. It is this restlessness that was to stimulate the yearning for republican freedoms. Throughout the *Florentine Histories*, as this unusual phenomenon is revealed rising into violence, flourishing and subsiding, only to rise again, it appears both powerful and irresistible.

Only gradually, as Machiavelli concentrates on its various manifestations, does the reader begin to realize that this strange restlessness was apparently

unknown to the ancient Romans. Thus Corso Donati, an influential Florentine who died in 1308 and who 'deserves to be enumerated among our choicest citizens,' is described as having 'a restless mind [that] caused his country and his party to forget the obligations they owed him, and in the end his restlessness brought upon his country an infinity of evils and to himself death'; Castruccio is recalled as inflicting great damage 'upon the Florentines in pillage, captivity, desolation and fire'; and fourteenth-century Florence is referred to as possessed of 'innumerable tumults.'¹⁵

Again, it seems not to be the upheavals that attract his attention, or their barbarity, as much as their emotional, psychological and spiritual powers of transformation. These are seen as disturbing and altering the entire post-Roman atmosphere. Around and through this atmosphere, moreover, as if amid the spasmodic gleams of a sort of occluded moonlight, his own balanced and symmetrical style casts its magical, softening, aesthetic glow. More transparently than in the stiffer Latin of Bruni and Poggio, it allows the succession of catastrophes to be glimpsed and witnessed through a moderating aura.

Nowhere is the contrast between these restless events and Machiavelli's style more serenely apparent than in his descriptions of the Pazzi Conspiracy of 1478 and the death of Lorenzo (the Magnificent) de' Medici in 1492:

Francesco and Bernardo [two of the Conspiracy's murderers] were inspired by such feelings of hatred [for the Medici] and the lust of murder, and pursued their object with such callousness and resolution, that as they led Giuliano [de' Medici] to the church, and even within it, they amused him with droll and jovial stories... . Francesco covered him with wounds whilst he lay there; indeed with such rage did he strike that he wounded himself seriously in the thigh... . In the midst of these terrible deeds it seemed as if the church would fall in upon the people; the cardinal [Lorenzo] clung to the altar, and with difficulty was saved by the priests; when the tumult was appeased he was taken by the signori to the palace where he remained until his liberation.¹⁶

To see him [Lorenzo the Magnificent] at one time in his grave moments and at another in his gay was to see in him two personalities, joined as it were with invisible bonds. During his last days he suffered great agony owing to the malady with which he was afflicted – oppressed by some deadly stomach trouble – which terminated fatally in April 1492. There had never died in Florence, nor yet in Italy, one for whom his country mourned so much or who left behind him so wide a reputation for wisdom.

Heaven gave many signs that ruin would follow his decease; among such signs was the destruction of the highest pinnacle of San Reparata [the *Duomo*] by lightning.¹⁷

Yet Lorenzo's death, with which Machiavelli chooses to end the Florentine history, serves only as an augury of further disasters, including 'the downfall of Italy, and which, none knowing how to [prevent], will perpetuate her ruin.' The restlessness, or a constant modern uncertainty, seems to have been selected to provide both the theme and a type of spyglass on the work itself.

Lights before the Storm

He wrote these final lines in early or mid-1525. He had spent the previous couple of years, mostly at Sant'Andrea, on little apart from writing his history, and with few distractions aside from birding and tending to his farm.

Pope Leo X, who had hired him, did not live to see the results. He died soon after the contract was signed, in December 1521, of a sudden 'violent chill,' though full of dreams, among them that his armies, united with the forces of Charles V of Spain, would drive the French out of Italy. In exchange, the Emperor had promised to deal with the excommunicated and troublesome Martin Luther, by putting him on trial and having him executed.

Leo had been succeeded by a timorous, scholarly, Flemish stopgap Pope, Adrian VI. He had been unanimously elected in January 1522, mostly to prevent the election of Cardinal Giulio de'Medici, whose name seemed to frighten the rest of the cardinals. Adrian had known Charles since the future Emperor was seven, when he was hired as his tutor. He shared both his trust and his hostility to Luther. He was unable, however, to institute Church reforms or bring about Luther's prosecution for heresy before falling ill and dying in 1523.

Unimpeded, Giulio de'Medici was now able to step into the breach among happy if soon to be deflated hopes for his future. It was to him as Pope Clement VII in Rome that Machiavelli presented the finished or nearly finished *Florentine Histories*, in May 1525.¹ Clement had already expressed his positive feelings about his historian to Francesco Vettori on 8 March: 'He ought to come [to the Vatican with his work], and I feel for certain that his books [the multiple volumes of the *Histories*] are going to give pleasure.'²

In July, presumably after having browsed through what Machiavelli had written, Clement confirmed his approval in the finest way, by doubling what he was to be paid. Further confirmation lay in his sending Machiavelli to Faenza to mull over with Guicciardini the advisability of raising a citizen militia in

Romagna. Its purpose, as had suddenly and surprisingly become plain, would be to take on the armies of Charles V.

Amid every Pope's constant switching and realigning of his unreliable, often betrayed, dwindling and collapsing alliances simply to guarantee his survival, as between France and Spain, Charles had once again become a likely menace. Guicciardini remained opposed, as always, to the recruitment of native-born, unprofessional troops, even if he and Machiavelli got on famously despite their tactical disagreements, as when he wrote to Machiavelli, now back in Florence, in a more personal vein on 25 July: 'I understand that after your departure Mariscotta,' a courtesan with whom Machiavelli spent some time in Faenza while awaiting Clement's eventually negative decision on recruiting the citizen militia, 'spoke of you very flatteringly and greatly praised your manners and conversation. That warms my heart.'³ It certainly warmed Machiavelli's ('I glory in this [news] more than in anything I have in the world[:] I shall be pleased if you would give her my regards'), perhaps because over the past few years, the favourable reception of his history aside, much of the rest of his life had gone badly enough.

His brother Totto – priest, occasional art-dealer and businessman, whose affection mattered greatly – had died in his late forties in June 1522, probably during an outbreak of plague in Florence. In April 1523 Francesco Vettori had worried with him over their both growing older and a bit 'finicky.' They ought to reflect more honestly on what they had been like when young. What troubled him at the moment was the problematic behaviour, at least for those days, of Machiavelli's by now adult son Lodovico: 'He has a boy with him, he plays with him, sports with him, walks about with him, whispers in his ear; they sleep in the same bed. What about it? Perhaps even beneath these things there is nothing wrong.'

Remembering his hedonistic youth, and Machiavelli's, Vettori voiced some solid regrets: 'My father, if he had known my ways and character, would never have tied me down to a wife, since nature had meant me for games and sport, not sighing after profit, scarcely concerned for family matters. But a wife and daughters have forced me to change.'⁴

Or both of them to do so, and this with other miseries pouring in. Piero Soderini had died on 13 June 1522, soon after a new conspiracy aimed at the Medici, or at least at Cardinal Giulio, had been discovered, though it was swiftly crushed. On this occasion an anti-Medici-planned ambush had not involved Machiavelli, even if he and Soderini may have sympathized with the idea.

Its discovery, however, put an efficient end to the convivial gatherings at the Rucellai gardens which had kept up his intellectual spirits over some years. The assassination plan had been entirely amateurish, and fumbled preparations to murder Cardinal Giulio saw Machiavelli's close friends Zanobi Buondelmonte and Luigi Alamanni accused and forced to flee, though on their later return from France they were captured and released. Two other conspirators were arrested, tried and beheaded.⁵

It was probably now as well, or a little earlier, that Machiavelli composed (in a document surviving in his own hand) a set of modest reforms for governing Florence (*Discursus florentinarum rerum post mortem iunioris Laurentii Medicis*). Written shortly after the death of Leo X, who had requested it, and appearing to support a restoration of the Republic while evaluating political improvements that might seem practical only under a continuation of Medici rule, Machiavelli argues that 'unless [the government] is inclusive in such a way that it will become a well-ordered republic, its inclusiveness is likely to make it fall more rapidly,' and that as long as the city has 'institutions that can ... stand firm [because] ... everyone has a hand in them ... no class of citizen ... will need to desire revolution' (*innovazione*).⁶

Perhaps as early as 1523, though possibly as late as 1524, and despite his work on his *Florentine Histories*, his trips to Florence led him into a new love affair which rapidly came to mean far more than any of his others. It rolled on, flared up, waned and seemed to burn with a spellbinding intensity over the next few years, or according to his passionate opportunities with the popular, beautiful actress-madrigalist Barbera Raffacani Salutati.

Widely known as Barbera Fiorentina, she was a well-educated woman who belonged to the class of performers termed *cortigiane oneste*, or 'gentle' courtesans, or those of 'noble' character. In her case the phrase implied musical accomplishments more than sufficient to inspire him to compose *canzoni* or *intermedii* for her, which were to be inserted into new productions of *The Mandragola*. It seems likely as well that another of his plays, *Clizia*, which owes its plot to Plautus's *Casinia* – parts of Machiavelli's play are almost word-for-word translations of Plautus's Latin – and which he may have finished before 1525, was actually written for her, and even dashed off at speed, as if intended for a party or a gala performance.

He had probably met her at one of the lavish feast-entertainments, organized around music, dance and often a play, at the house of Jacopo di Filippo

Falconetti, nicknamed *il Fornaciaio* (the owner of a furnace) after the profitable brick-making kiln located on his farm with its famous estate-garden, just past the San Frediano gate in Santa Maria in Verzaia.⁷

Jacopo's evenings drew large audiences from the cream of the city's commercial and show-business families, along with less fashionable citizens and even craftspeople. His delicately, elegantly perfumed and costumed guests rode, walked or were taxied by carriage from the centre of the city to his garden and banqueting tables. Even in those warlike times they would have moved through taper-lit streets and alleys lined with the devices of the declining but still extensive wool and cotton industry.

Sheep pens and wool racks bulged along the Arno: the brittle scent of ammonia, essential for cleansing the fabrics, including the silks, lent an onion-like zing to the night air. The outer walls of many houses, as if quilted with iron clasps for drying and fixing the dyes, flaunted bold banners of cotton that flapped colourfully in the smoky dark.

At night, too, the streets boasted groups of musicians: Florentines had always been eager for the latest love song, especially as printed sheet music had begun to become available after 1500: Leo himself had once hired a lutanist at 300 florins per year, an astounding sum, and ennobled him: another musician had been granted an archbishopric.

Rich, but in no sense a nobleman, Jacopo had decided to present the première, complete with *entr'acte* music by Philippe Verdelot and a stage set painted by Bastiano da San Gallo, of Machiavelli's full-length *Clizia* on 13 January 1525. His real purpose, however, was to announce the end of his own five-year term of banishment: once a member of the Signoria, he had been dismissed from office and exiled to his house. With his term of exile now at an end, he pinned his hopes of resuming his former social prominence on a theatrical extravaganza meant to outshine the widely praised staging of Machiavelli's *Mandragola* in Florence a few months earlier.

'The fame of your revelries has spread,' Filippo de' Nerli wrote to him in February, or just weeks later, with what seems a touch of exaggeration. 'I know about the garden levelled off to make it into a stage for your comedy. I know about the invitations not only to the first and most noble patricians of the city but also to the middle class and after them to the plebeians... The fame of your comedy has flown all over.'⁸

As well it might have, given the city's appetites for paradox, wit and

sex-comedies. In Machiavelli's five-act play a father and son fall in love with the same woman, who also happens to be the eponymous heroine, the father's seventeen-year-old adopted daughter and his son's adoptive sister.

In a less confident age, perhaps the twentieth century of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams or Harold Pinter, this unbalanced domestic situation might have provoked violence, drunkenness, poetry, divorce, murder and foul language. Plautus and Machiavelli treated it as an opportunity for silly marital manoeuvres combined with slapstick deceptions.

Flippancy aside, however, it would be a mistake to imagine that Machiavelli's Florence was more amenable to father-son sex competitions than other cities or ages. Also mistaken would be the naïve assumption, made by some on the basis of skimpy evidence, that Nicomaco (a contraction of Niccolò Machiavelli), the sly, lusty, foolish and hopeful father-lover, is some sort of literal stand-in for Machiavelli himself – an unflattering if not pointless idea.

What seems to have mattered to Machiavelli, as may be deduced from the liveliness of the plot, is the sheer entertainment value of the love triangle, or that the play presents a set of plausible psychological relations. These ricochet between father, son, Clizia and everyone else. Their mostly imaginary sex lives seem in fact to be rendered with an even shrewder authenticity than by Machiavelli's Roman predecessor.

A remarkable touch in both the Latin and Italian versions is that the heroine never shows up. Her unexplained absence, together with the audience's frustrated expectation that she had better show up somehow, shifts the focus from who beds whom to who marries whom. Her proxy father's oafish effort to marry her off to a proxy servant-husband willing to accept another man's making love to his own wife, and his son's less oafish efforts to marry Clizia himself, are each appropriately frustrated and rewarded.

At the core of Machiavelli's adoptive comedy, or his fiddling with each of his characters' delicate marionette strings, is the manipulative, bewitching Sofronia, Nicomaco's prankster-wife and the mother of the lovesick Cleandro. Her son's crazed passion for his at first reluctant foster-sister is rendered even more absurd by his childish gullibility.

The play thus thrives not simply on mad reversals but on reversals of reversals. At one point Nicomaco is tricked into going to bed with his manservant and, believing him to be Clizia, sexually assaulting him, to his criminal embarrassment. The play battens on treachery betrayed, which in the end is presented as a nostrum for the tangled ambitions of an uproarious household.

Machiavelli's Prologue is surprising and original along these lines, and given its subsequent influence on other playwrights, such as Goethe in *Faust* and Pirandello in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, of significance to the history of drama. 'Come on out, all of you,' the Author (or Machiavelli) calls to his actors as the play gets underway, and then turns to the audience: 'It's a good idea ... to meet the characters, so that you will know them when you see them on the stage.'⁹

This self-conscious ploy, which allows the actors to be seen with their make-up half on and their costumes unlaced and rumped, heightens rather than lessens the sense of audience-participation in the illusion-making to come. The playgoers become a source of the theatrical magic, while the actors are perceived neither as the only role-players nor as ordinary people but as sliding back and forth between the two on a type of aesthetic-psychological shuttle.

Mingling the theatrical with their ordinary lives, or what Shakespeare was to describe as their lives as poor, bare, fork'd animals, they spark fascination in another way as well. They become alert to their role-playing in the theatre of life itself, if only, as the author insists, because the world must be a stage.

Machiavelli seemed to switch about more than usual between his own roles over the next few months. At one point he played estate agent for Francesco Guicciardini, scouting and reporting on run-down farms which he visited and that his friend bought sight unseen but which could be treated as investments.

In August he played the father amazed at the histrionics of his son, Ludovico, whose paranoid letters overflowed with menaces: 'I shall punish that scoundrel,' 'I feel like ... revenge.' Ludovico had frequently run afoul of the law, and Machiavelli now decided not to honour his debts.

In September (1525) he reverted to the role of active Florentine citizen, learning to his relief that the *accoppiatori*, or magistrates, had finally pronounced him *imborsato*, or eligible for public office (should he join the Signoria, or stand for *Gonfaloniere*?).

In August again, he took a fling at playing the amateur chemist, supplying Guicciardini with a recipe for headache and constipation pills: he should mix various quantities of aloe, saffron, myrrh, betony, Armenian bole, germander and pimperl.

In October he resumed the role of busy father, this time tending his son Bernardo, 'sick with a double tertian fever' in Sant'Andrea. In October too he discovered that he had become a much heralded man of the theatre, plunging

into preparations for a new production of the *Mandragola*: 'I have been dining with Barbera these last few evenings [he told Guicciardini] and discussing the play; ... she has offered to come with her singers and sing the songs between the acts. I have offered to write lyrics consistent with the action, and [Luigi Alamanni] has offered to provide her and her singers with lodging.'

Ironically by mid-October, and in view of each of his roles probably only half in jest, he had begun signing his letters 'Historian, Comic Author and Tragic Author.'¹⁰

The Assault on Rome and a Fatal Illness

Ever since the election of Clement VII, diverse if ominous military pressures, magnified by his incompetence and folly, had been building across northern Italy. ‘We are all walking in the shadows,’ Guicciardini had remarked in August 1525 when he considered the political-military signals bunching to the north and then rippling south as they began to affect the whole peninsula, ‘but with our hands tied behind our backs, so that we cannot avoid bumps.’¹

Reflecting on the unmistakable military aspects of their dilemma, and in the light of an abortive attempt, betrayed by Ferrante Francesco de Avalos (1489–1525), the Marquis of Pescara, to drive Charles V out of Italy altogether – even if he had since died – Machiavelli wrote to Guicciardini in December that ‘this gang [of leaders here in Florence] will never do anything honourable and bold worth living and dying for; I observe so much fear in the citizens of Florence, and such disinclination to offer any opposition to whoever is preparing to devour us.’²

Despite his pessimistic outlook, he decided to take on a measure of responsibility for the city’s defences. Over the next few weeks, he actually seemed yanked in opposite directions. On the one hand, he felt inclined to continue with his playwright’s career. On the other, he felt the importance of advising Florentine and Roman leaders on how to protect themselves against what he regarded as an inevitable foreign invasion. In Rome he had acquired a quasi-friend and partisan in the person of the Pope. Since the publication of *The Art of War*, the former Giulio de’Medici had viewed him as an expert on military matters and so worth dispatching to trouble spots as a defence consultant. As tensions between France, Spain and the Vatican became more potentially violent, Machiavelli’s playwriting ambitions surrendered to a concentration on war itself.

This shift stimulated reapplications of energy and his analytical abilities,

seconded by travel and his submission of speedy reports. As both had been aspects of his earlier diplomatic life, he seemed in significant ways to have returned to his former routines.

Three events, including one just past, now also proved crucial to the uncertain Florentine future as well as to a horror that shortly unfolded to the south, in Rome, and, to the north, in and near Florence, and to him personally. These were the capture on 24 February 1525 of the French King Francis I by the Spanish, led by the Marquis of Pavia (who later died); the formation on 22 May 1526 of the anti-imperial, anti-Spanish League of Cognac, a defensive alliance of mutually suspicious leaders whose interests clashed senselessly from the start; and his accepting an assignment to investigate, together with a senior Spanish military officer, such improvements as might be essential to the defensive walls surrounding Florence.

Of the three, the defeat and kidnapping of the French King was to become most instrumental in unleashing a wave of menacing popular disapproval against the Pope. It would be succeeded within less than two years by a military storm, or the opportunity for the unthinkable to become thinkable in the form of an assault on the capital, and this on a scale more atrocious than almost any let loose against any civilized community.

In the revised edition of his *Orlando*, Ariosto shows himself grimly impressed by the defeat of the French King. Though his capture and months-long imprisonment were brought to an end by an agreement signed by Charles V – an event unexpected by Machiavelli, who saw no reason for Charles to cede his advantage – the papacy itself now seemed in danger.³ The King was granted his freedom in exchange for handing over his young sons as hostages, but doing so hardly helped as the French weakness had become perceptible to everyone. Matters looked worse when set against the Spanish and German advances into Italy. As Ariosto saw it, the King's humiliation seemed most portentous because it had developed out of self-deception:

Fortune treats us like the dust that the wind catches up and swirls about, wafting it skywards and the next moment blowing it back to the ground from which it came; and she has the [K]ing believe that he has concentrated a hundred thousand troops round Pavia, for he looks only at his outlay in wages, not at whether his forces have in fact increased or dwindled./The fault lies with his own skinflint ministers, and with his own indulgence in having trusted them.⁴

Yet trust them he had, and the result was that ‘the flower of French nobility [lay] obliterated in the field,’ to the tune of 8,000 killed or wounded. Cornered in a park strewn with the bodies of immense numbers of his officers, he had surrendered to ‘five soldiers who did not know who he was; but the Viceroy happening to come, he made himself known to him, who kissing his hand with great reverence, took him prisoner in the name of the Emperor.’ His arrest seemed the worse for Charles’s deferential treatment of him, as if he no longer mattered.⁵

He no longer did, or not then, except that his outrage led to the formation of the League of Cognac. His resentments combined with those of the Pope, who had been his supporter (news of their alliance was published as early as 5 January 1525), of Henry VIII of England (who later snubbed them), of Venice, whose rulers feared losing their colonies to the Emperor, and of Francesco Maria Sforza (b. 1492), the Duke of Milan, who attempted to provoke Pescara into rebelling against Charles and was deposed for his trouble. From the start, though, the whole flimsy alliance seemed to reflect more in the way of wishful thinking than military agility. During its brief existence it was guided by vengeance rather than strategy, and later by defeat rather than practical hopes of success.⁶

Guicciardini had reluctantly abandoned his desire to sponsor a production of Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* in Faenza. This happy event had been planned for the carnival season of February 1526, but in the newly toxic military climate, which required his participation as the papal-appointed negotiator assigned to patch up the League of Cognac, he had no time to stage-manage a play.

Machiavelli might in any case take comfort from his already solid dramatic triumphs. Twice published in Venice in 1522, including once by the renowned printer Alessandro Bidoni in a small, elegant edition as *Comedia di Callimaco & di Lucretia*, the *Mandragola* had met with a Venetian reception so boisterous that the first of its two scheduled performances had to be cancelled because a delirious demonstration by a mob of spectators had become chaotic.

In February 1526, Venetian performers staging a revival of Plautus’s *Menaechmi* (in translation), on ‘seeing [your play, which was done at the same time, or so Giovanni Manetti, who served as the production’s prompter, reported to him] ..., praised it so much more highly ... [that] spurred on by shame, they requested your play’s company ... to be so kind as to perform it in their house.’⁷ As its popularity increased, merchants living in the Florentine colony at Venice begged Machiavelli to send them any new plays he might write, and his life all

at once seemed transformed. If his political ambitions had failed to win him a coveted government position, the theatrical adulation might compensate.

In contrast, too, his attempts to deal with a likely war over Florence and other Italian cities were hamstrung by widespread hesitations. Every measure essential to preventing an invasion, or the city's possible sacking by imperial troops, hung fire. For the most part, indeed, the lack of preparedness seemed attributable to Medici squabbling. As an official investigation following a bitter but short-lived 1527 Florentine uprising against the Medici was later to make clear, even when confronted by threats to their survival, leading members of the family kept up their scrambling after money, pilfering where they could, and scavenging after power. It made no difference that both were rapidly becoming elusive.

The election of Giulio as Pope had left Florence and its territories still under his indirect rule, but they were now also under the chillier supervision of Cardinal Silvio Passerini (1459–1529), who represented the ambitions of two Medici bastard offspring, Ippolito and Alessandro. They were the sons, it was said, of Giuliano and Lorenzo.⁸ Their claims clashed with those of Clarice, the daughter of Piero de' Medici, whose interests in turn defied the ambitions of a formidable young Medici soldier, already glowing with victories achieved elsewhere in Italy, Giovanni de' Medici (1498–1526), known as Giovanni delle Bande Nere, or Giovanni of the Black Bands, after the black stripes which he ordered stitched across the armour and clothing of his private army in a gesture of mourning for Leo X.

The entire family's interference in the social, military and economic life of Rome and Florence led them to nurture and throttle if not strangle it. As a group, they ignored the urgency either to prepare for war or to risk the loss of the Medici papacy and their political dominance. In these messy circumstances, on 25 November 1526, or just as Giovanni and his two thousand soldiers had achieved a critical importance for the defence of Rome, he met with a horrid, absurd death. It took place precisely as his units stormed into battle against an imperial army consisting of German *Landsknechte*, or well-trained Lutheran Protestants heading south under Georg von Frundsberg.

If historical changes may reasonably be attributed to incidents or tipping points, one such might well have been the incompetent behaviour of the army surgeon summoned that evening to treat the wound inflicted on his right leg by a falconet-ball. Extracted from the battlefield where he had been directing his troops in a so far winning effort to prevent von Frundsberg's army from

crossing the Po and plunging south toward Florence and Rome, he held up a torch to let the surgeon see where to amputate his leg – an instance perhaps of his typical bravado – but then watched helplessly as the skidding medical blade maimed him to death (he died on 30 November), together with, as Guicciardini put it, ‘so much courage.’⁹

Machiavelli had known and admired him, and their admiration had been mutual. A rough-and-tumble, sophisticated soldier, Giovanni thought highly of his *Art of War*, and back in July had made Machiavelli his guest at the headquarters of the League of Cognac in the Badia a Casaretto near Milan. There he had issued a friendly challenge to him to put the 3,000 troops then at his disposal through a military drill according to the methods described in his book. To his astonishment, he had noted Machiavelli’s inability, after two frustrating hours spent shouting orders at them in a sweltering sun, to form them into much more than a tumbling, swarming mess. Matteo Bandello (1480–1562), a Dominican priest and author, whose plays were later to become the sources of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night*, and who was present, reports that Giovanni finally managed to array the troops on his own, but adds that Machiavelli redeemed himself at dinner with some salacious and witty tale-telling.¹⁰

Nor were his abilities as a military analyst any less than professional. In Florence three months earlier, in April 1526, he had been asked by an anxious Pope to accompany the respected military engineer and refugee from imperial Spain, Count Pietro Navarra, on a tour of inspection of the city’s ramparts and walls. Machiavelli submitted a report arguing for an aggressive re-design of nearly all of them: ‘Some of the walls ... on the far side of the Arno ought to be torn down, some ought to be extended, and some ought to be contracted... . Count Pietro will be here tomorrow and the next day, and we shall do our best to pick his brains as much as possible.’

Nor had he been shy about offering Guicciardini, then serving as lieutenant-general or overall commander of the Pope’s forces, some sharp criticism of Clement’s unquestionably garbled war aims: ‘For the love of God, let us not lose this opportunity [to see that] the Spaniards are somehow pulled out of Lombardy so that they cannot return.’

He doled out the occasional smidgeon of congratulations on his own behalf: ‘If the fortifications proceed, people here believe that I am to be given the position of supervisor and secretary, that I am to be given one of my sons [Bernardo] as an assistant.’¹¹ He and Bernardo received the appointment, but

while the next months still found him 'in the field,' and even if by September Milan looked likely to fall to one of the League's assaults, all chances of victory over the Emperor abruptly vanished on 23 September.

Reports now poured in that Rome had simply surrendered to the Colonna faction, based in Naples and involved in a conspiracy with Don Ugo da Moncada, the Emperor's captain and military representative. The shock of this capitulation was overwhelming. After reducing his forces because of assurances he had received of Charles's peaceful intentions, Clement was ambushed in dead of night by 500 troops. Threatened with capture or death, he had fled to the Castel Sant'Angelo, where he had begun to attempt negotiations.

For Machiavelli, away from Florence (or 'in the field'), a more or less strategic balance seemed to have collapsed in hysterical confusion. Clement himself created the impression of surrendering not only to the Colonna but to irrationality. Grasping at straws, he at once signed an agreement with his enemies. This allowed him to return to the Vatican, but also let the Emperor conclude that the war had been settled in his favour. Clement next sabotaged what he had signed, and the result was an uproar. Bourbon's army, joining with Spanish units capable of fielding 18,000 additional troops, swept forward in a more determined than ever advance on Florence and Rome.¹²

Beliefs and values frayed amid these frantic pressures. Fresh waves of violence produced acts of betrayal with an eerie reliability. Atrocities followed. In Florence an insurrection aimed at the Medici, on 26 April 1527, the 'Friday rising,' as it was called, was undertaken just as the Pope's reserves were lethally depleted. Despite its brief success, in the end it provided neither the city nor Machiavelli himself with any real gains.

Over the next few weeks, as would have seemed natural enough, he sought out a position with the new government. He soon discovered that where the Medici had rejected him because he had served the Republic, the new Signoria rejected him because he had served the Medici. In addition, as he learned of the violence accompanying the rebels' takeover, he realized that his loyalty would probably have lain with his government friends Francesco Vettori and Bartolomeo Cavalcanti. Both had been trapped in the Palazzo della Signoria as 1500 pro-republican troops surged momentarily at its entrances. His joy in a republican restoration might well have expired in his anxiety over their safety and that of the hundreds of fleeing citizens.¹³

And with good reason: the countryside surrounding Florence, as far as the Mugello and up to Sant'Andrea in Percussina, and later even straight down into the city streets, saw the League's returning soldiers – the army under Francesco Guicciardini, ordered back as a defence against Bourbon's expected attack – jostling, lurching and threatening everywhere.

A dread of the *Landsknechte* in Tuscany had preceded their reputation for cruelty and rape. Where months earlier Machiavelli had fretted over Barbera's devotion – 'She told me she would like you to write every week,' Jacopo di Filippi (*il Fornaciaio*) let him know in August 1526 – his fears now raced along lines best indicated by Francesco Vettori: 'Men have come here [to Florence] from both Milan and Cremona who have told such tales about the imperial troops, the Spanish as well as the Germans, that there is no one who would not prefer to have the devil rather than them.'¹⁴

Of greater importance was the fact that in bringing the League's forces into Florence, Guicciardini had altered the entire military picture. Their redeployment persuaded Bourbon, a soldier experienced in the frustrations of sieges, that he would be better off as the commander of hungry, unpaid men if he bypassed the city and made for the jugular, so to speak, or for Rome. This he did, and Guicciardini, who also switched strategies, set off in uneasy pursuit of his long columns, which had already moved to within twenty-five miles of the Florentine gates. As the local danger abated, Guicciardini decided to offer the Pope whatever assistance he could manage. Like everyone, though, he remained convinced that Rome would prove sturdy enough, with its ancient towers, tunnels and redoubts, to survive all attacks, and so was in no hurry.

As Guicciardini moved south, Machiavelli seems to have gone with him, so the evidence suggests. If not, he soon followed on horseback, and if not as far as Rome, then over much of the way.

Elements of mystery now begin to intrude on what were to become his final weeks. The intervals themselves seemed somehow protracted by his growing illness – peritonitis most likely, or a long-standing complaint of the bowels and intestines – which may well have affected his ease in travelling.

In early April at Imola, to which he was sent by Guicciardini to arrange for billeting the League's soldiers heading back to Florence, he wrote about his forebodings to his school-age favourite son Guido, who was later to become a priest, in a letter ostensibly about family matters (a mule had gone 'crazy'; it ought to be turned loose; Guido should devote himself to his studies; like

his father before him, he had begun learning Ovid's *Metamorphoses*): 'Greet Madonna Marietta for me and tell her I have been expecting – and still do – to leave here any day. I have never longed so much to return to Florence as I do now, but there is nothing else I can do. Simply tell her that whatever she hears, she should be of good cheer, since I shall be there before any danger comes' (plate XIII).¹⁵ He tried to keep his word, but later in April, as Guicciardini sent him to Forlì, he let Vettori know about his deeper doubts. At that point Bourbon's push on Rome was still to come. The threat to Florence was blowing hot and cold, and most options seemed unappealing.

He offered up a soupçon of affection for 'Messer Francesco Guicciardini' and Florence itself, which he 'loved more than my own soul,' and then observed that 'Despair often discovers remedies that choice could not.' He suggested that a 'reckless' assault on Bourbon's forces might be necessary to save his beloved city. Despair and recklessness were rare enough terms for him, though they may only have reflected his sense of an unusual emergency.¹⁶

To be sure, what came next, or the sack of Rome, proved far worse, with its more than 10,000 dead, its hundreds of homes and monuments wrecked and burned, the tens of thousands injured, wounded, starving and dying, than what he or anyone might have imagined. He first heard of the sack from witnesses and through written reports reaching him after most of the damage had been done, in mid-May. This was at another stopping-off place on his Guicciardini-directed journeys, Orvieto, where he was able to provide minimal financial assistance to survivors.

On 6 May, as he now learned, Bourbon's troops had managed to pour through an opening in the Roman walls, and then into the dishevelled, lovely, half-unprotected city itself. Bourbon had been killed in the initial assault, but his rampaging army had driven the Pope, Cardinals, nuns, scores of other prelates and crowds of citizen-refugees back into the dismal safety of the Castel Sant'Angelo. Outside, a shabby, atrocious battle had erupted, leading to the Pope's defeat amid ghoulish acts of carnage.

The battle's symbolism could only have impressed him in the worst way possible. The numbers of dead, the shadowy ruins and desecration, clearly meant much more than themselves, and more than anyone could yet understand. A grotesque tragedy had occurred. A frightening, murderous impulse had squirmed out of the dark. A spectre of cultural annihilation, perhaps hoisting itself out of a barbarous past, seemed to have surfaced and wreaked havoc.

Surely it had emerged from the fifth century and the earlier sack. Surely its animosity was directed at history itself. Surely as *Fortuna's* wheel turned, the historic previous fall, entailing the collapse of the Roman Empire, had now, after a thousand years, been somehow reenacted.¹⁷ As a humanist spending a good deal of his life attempting to make sense of history, he recognized familiar ingredients: the cataclysm and slaughter, followed by inarticulate shock – signals that the world was bearing witness to no mere act of vandalism or murder, but to an ancient drama strangely boiled over, as if the modern world shifted among inklings of an end.

He could not have known that the sack preceded by weeks the end of his life, though other endings were also on their way. Guicciardini sent him to the port of Citavecchia, perhaps to assist the Pope as a refugee. Clement and his hangers-on might be helped by the French warships gathered there under the command of the Genoese naval officer Andrea Doria (1468–1560). At Citavecchia Machiavelli would have learned fresh details about the uprising in Florence, whose new government was to last just three years. The hope was awakened that if he returned he might be offered a post in the reborn republic, perhaps even his old one. Not only was this not to be, however, as he soon realized, but the idea itself put paid to his or anyone's belief in republics as necessarily linked with tolerance and justice.

Administered from the start by a cadre of surviving Savonarolan sympathizers, or religious fanatics, the revived Florentine Grand Council ordered all Jews, by means of an anti-semitic edict that was unevenly enforced, to close up shop, and especially their money-lending businesses, and leave town. A new citizens council rushed through sumptuary laws. It larded them with draconian regulations of dowries, blasphemy, prostitution, sodomy, gambling and discussions of religion, which priests were authorized to prohibit. In the Savonarolan manner, political discussions were banned, publications censored and books of which the Church disapproved destroyed. The new republic would be oriented to 'the health of the soul,' as its officials coolly announced, or 'the good life.'

In this repressive atmosphere it scarcely surprised him in the end to see the post of Second Secretary awarded on 10 June to Francesco Tarugi. He had served on a Medici committee designated The Eight in Charge of Affairs (*l'Otto di Pratica*). Machiavelli's frustration at failing to obtain the post seems nonetheless to have affected him intensely. He had submitted letters of recommendation from influential friends, among them Zanubi Buondelmonti and

Luigi Alamanni, but they appear to have been airily dismissed.¹⁸ Whether in response to the rejection or because his disease was running its course, on 20 June he became more seriously ill. At the family *palazzo* in Florence, with friends gathered about him, he took doses of the aloe concoction which he had prescribed for Guicciardini. They probably made him worse.

Five of his six living children were on hand: Ludovico, who as recently as 22 May had been off near Ancona, whence he had written his father about a horse that he wanted help in selling; Bernardo, his eldest son; Guido; Piero, just thirteen; and Bartolomea, also known as Baccina, who would later marry his literary executor. Totto, his infant son, named for his father's dead brother, who would not survive his first few years, was off with a wet nurse. Marietta was present.

To judge from the warm-hearted letter sent him by Guido on 17 April, when he was at Forlì, family feelings ran as ever strong and true: 'We learn from your letter to Madonna Marietta that you have bought such a beautiful chain for Baccina, who does nothing but think of [it] and pray God for you, that He should make you come back soon.' Machiavelli had always urged him to 'take pains to learn [literature] and music, for you are aware how much distinction is given me for what little ability I possess.'¹⁹

Death came on 21 May. He took confession, as was usual for everyone, regardless of his hostility to the Church.²⁰ His interment at Santa Croce followed the next day, though it is uncertain where in the basilica he was buried as his monument dates from centuries later. If his life had now come to an end, his new career in a wider world, which would attract the attention of millions, most of them as yet unborn, had scarcely begun.

Epilogue: The Historical Afterglow

No one sets out to become an eponymist, not the Marquis de Sade, who may be reckoned among the mildest of men, with the exception of the occasion when he heaved a rival through a whorehouse window, not the Baron Sacher-Masoch, who took no pleasure in pain, not Peter Paul Rubens, whose women were as often svelte as Rubenesque, and not Machiavelli, who throughout his life was admired as a poet, historian, dramatist, diplomatist, lover, father, husband, satirist, politician and philosopher. In his own day it would have seemed inconceivable that he might be seen as Machiavellian along the frigid lines of subsequent ages.

These have to do with evil and the machinations essential to promoting it. Alongside them runs the assumption of dreadful calculation, as evil can scarcely be an accident. Machiavelli nonetheless hardly evades all responsibility for the diabolical views that were soon to be attributed to him. If 'evil' refers to acts of massive destruction reaching beyond the merely criminal, no matter how 'criminal' is defined, and if it takes place in an environment conducive to diabolical behaviour, his own preoccupation with its devastations remains undeniable. In devoting so much of his life to investigating political and military leaders engaged in evil, and to exposing their methods as well as immersing himself though hesitantly in their careers, he may fairly be said to exhibit much more than a passing interest in what is later seen as 'Machiavellian.'¹

Such at any rate was the consensus as after his death his reputation began to pick up its unjustifiably evil mystique. Even his name became a sticking place for tantalizing, demonic tales suggestive of the 'Machiavellian.' Some of them may have been true. The tales themselves eased the conversion of his life into a legend. A significant example centres on a dream which he may have recounted as he lay dying. In it he saw two groups of men strolling past, the first charming, pagan and doomed to Hell, the second boring, Christian and awaiting salvation. Asked whose company he preferred, he smiled and said, 'The pagan': their liveliness would be more entertaining than the moralizing certainties of those in some state of bliss.

The story may be false. It seems raffishly tailor-made. He may have invented it for the pleasure of providing his friends with some final macabre jest. It was also attributed to him decades later, by an acquaintance who claimed to have seen him during his last hours. Like his books and other paradoxical stories, however, it seems to capture fundamental aspects of his character.²

The chief source of his notoriety was *The Prince*, known to the ruling circles of Florence and much of the rest of Italy as well as elsewhere, either in

manuscript or as an item of malicious, ignorant gossip, years before its publication in 1532. Here his political realism was taken to indicate the corruption of the author. His analysis of treachery was seen as approving it.

The Prince was first translated into French in 1553, into Latin in 1560, and into English by Edward Dacres in 1640. The lack of an English translation scarcely prevented the term 'Machiavel' from becoming common in English as early as 1570. By then, or starting in 1559, his entire corpus of work had been banned as seditious by the Holy Inquisition in Rome. Renewals of the Church ban were issued periodically. *The Prince* and most of his other books were available anyway, though, especially with not hard to obtain clerical dispensations. Several of his books, including *The Prince*, were also kept on tap for lawyers doing research into the paradoxes of power.

The Church likewise lost no time in denouncing *The Prince* as an incitement to Protestantism. Protestants themselves saw it as a menace to their existence: the St Bartholomew's Day massacre of thousands of Huguenots, in Paris and elsewhere in France, in 1572, was widely attributed to a 'Machiavellian' influence.

In England both author and book fared little better. As early as 1590, poets and playwrights, among them Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Robert Greene and John Donne, began to cite Machiavelli and *The Prince*, which was available in Latin, as the source of anything 'subtle,' sly, unscrupulous and malevolent. Machiavelli's now nefarious person shows up in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, where 'Machiavel' as Prologue introduces the action, in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* ('Am I subtle? Am I a Machiavel?'), in *Henry VI, 1* ('that notorious Machiavel!') and in *The Tragedy of Richard III*, whose anti-hero is often taken to be an incarnation of the 'Machiavellian.' A 'Machiavel' as a stock figure influences Jonson's *Volpone* and Donne's *Ignatius his Conclave*, which presents the Jesuit Ignatius of Loyola as engaged in a debate with Machiavelli before Lucifer.³

Piled-on centuries of calumnies diverted if not obscured any broad public, if not scholarly, consideration of the deeper themes of *The Prince*, *The Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories*. These consist in politics as continuous change, treachery as inevitable amid continuous change and the universe itself as a series of processes in which little if anything, apart from change, can be viewed as permanent. Machiavelli's modernism has often if not always been scanted and his historical foresight ignored. Insufficient attention, for instance, has

been paid to the fact that the inevitability of treachery renders inevitable an invalidation of all ideologies. Leaving aside any purely subjective viewpoint, the truth of religion can no more be seen as certain than the truth of communism, capitalism or fascism. Truth may be available, but in an ideological sense it remains elusive.

In modern times, surprisingly, the ideas of the political revolutionist Thomas Paine (1737–1809), who contributed to the development of democracy in America and France, match up in revealing ways with Machiavelli's. A new tradition has developed in an unexpected place, perhaps because both men had professional experience with the actual operations of political power. Though neither knew the work of the other, and though Paine never mentions Machiavelli, their enthusiasm for republican democracy and limitless empiricism, or what may work for a society in a practical sense, for religious scepticism and for unmasking hypocrisy, often at the expense of sacred beliefs, is uncannily similar. Paine's insights become a lens through which to focus on Machiavelli's, or to clarify strands of his political philosophy.

Both Machiavelli and Paine are above all linguistic purists, or authors to whom plain speech is not only preferable to jargon, *Newspeak*, misleading hipness, cant and academic mumbo-jumbo, but a kind of deity. For Paine as for Machiavelli, a humane government can only be founded amid a general cleansing of ordinary speech. Though times and issues may change, the simple phrase will always be superior to some complicated simplicity. Cleverness remains concreteness. Details remain the soul of argument. Language ought to sweat with vigour. Societies may collapse because of poor diction, bad grammar and meaningless expressions, rather than collapsing economies. Military failures are often the result of muddy sentences.⁴

Paine's *Common Sense* (1775) is common in the best sense because it represents the unadorned thinking of a disinterested, passionate person talking to people much like himself ('I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament'⁵), rather than the effusion of a bureaucrat eager to smother vitality with dullness. Machiavelli, who also refuses to adorn his sentences, had learned from Dante and Petrarch how lucid phrases may induce the magnetism of aesthetics. A combination of lucidity and aesthetics may expose the power of the universe itself, or God, if one believes in God, as the implicit logic of the sonnet and the meditational aspects of silent reading may induce self-consciousness and self-examination.

Savonarola and Cesare Borgia had taught him not merely ruthlessness but the medicinal surgery of candour. Since childhood, Ovid had shown him the universality of change. An acceptance of change as a ruling principle in every circumstance was essential to uncovering any truth at all.

Astonishingly, if hard to accept, neither Machiavelli nor Paine, as the author of *The Rights of Man* (1791), believed in democracy as the sole prescription for all political situations. Autocracy might be needed if the state were threatened. In overcoming invasion from without and the viciousness of squabbling nobles from within, Napoleon might prove more capable than Jefferson, Cesare Borgia more adept than Piero Soderini. Power was not for the squeamish.⁶

Both Machiavelli and Paine viewed autocracy as an interim remedy, however, even if neither paid much attention to how to remove it once it had been established. Change, or mutability, or what Machiavelli describes in his *Histories of Florence* as a modern 'restlessness' leading into a struggle for democracy, might resolve the contradiction of simultaneously needing and abhorring a tyrannical leader.

For Machiavelli, contradiction had always been as important as change. It contained the deeper senses of *Fortuna*. It supplied the richness of the characters in his plays and best poems, while encouraging a pliant approach to diplomacy. Its mystery lay at the heart of his early modern or Renaissance spirit. It allowed for the brilliant Renaissance mingling of nature with art, as when the morning flocks of Florentine swallows out of his childhood flashed about Brunelleschi's *Duomo*, or when as a result and as an adult he experienced time and again the revelation of the universe as perpetual surprise.

Notes

Abbreviations

- Correspondence* James B. Atkinson, David Sices eds, *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*. DeKalb, Ill., 1996.
- Hook* Judith Hook, *The Sack of Rome*. London, 1972.
- Life* Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*. Cecil Grayson trans. Chicago, 1963.
- Diary* Catherine Atkinson, *Debts, Dowries, Donkeys: The Diary of Niccolò Machiavelli's Father, Messer Bernardo, in Quattrocento Florence*. Frankfurt am Main, 2002.
- Villari* Pasquale Villari, *The Life and Times of Niccolò Machiavelli*. Linda Villari trans., 1899.
- Society* Gene Brucker ed., *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study*. Toronto, 1998.
- Florence* Harold Acton intro., Edward Chaney ed. *A Traveller's Companion to Florence*. New York, (rpt) 2002.
- Landucci* Luca Landucci, *A Florentine Diary from 1450 to 1516*. Alice de Rosen Jervis trans. New York, (rpt) 1969.
- CM* John M. Najemy ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*. Cambridge, 2010.
- History* John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200–1575*. Chichester, 2008.
- DW* *Historical, Political and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*. 4 vols. Detmold trans. Boston, 1882.
- Gilbert* *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*. Allan Gilbert trans. Vols I–III. Durham, 1965.

Introduction

- 1 Good summaries may be found in Caferro, p.176; *CM*, p.6f; Leo Strauss in Adams ed., *The Prince*, pp.180–5; and Sheldon S. Wolin, *ibid.*, pp.185–94; also *ibid.*, pp.227–38.
- 2 Luigi Guicciardini, *Sack*, p.89f; Hook, *Sack*, pp.162–3. Cf. also Francesco Guicciardini, *History*, p.382.
- 3 Hook, p.146f; L. Guicciardini, p.19; F. Guicciardini, pp.380–1; Hibbert, *House of Medici*, p.241f.
- 4 Hook, pp.144–5, pp.70–1; Najemy, *History*, pp.447–8; Chastel, p.157.
- 5 L. Guicciardini, p.32, pp.49–50; p.80; Hook, pp.172–4.
- 6 L. Guicciardini, p.77.
- 7 Hook, p.177. On population estimates, see also Mee, *Daily Life*, p.10; Cowell (on citizens only), p.48.
- 8 Hook, pp.159–61.
- 9 L. Guicciardini, pp.83–4; Hook, pp.159–61.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.183.
- 11 Cellini, p.81f.
- 12 L. Guicciardini, p.90.
- 13 Cellini, 83–4.
- 14 Chastel, p.127.
- 15 Hook, p.183–4.
- 16 L. Guicciardini, pp.96–100; pp.106–8.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.3.
- 18 Chastel, p.217; Hook, p.289.
- 19 L. Guicciardini, p.62.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp.85–6.
- 21 Hook, p.141–2.
- 22 *Correspondence*, p.408.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.416.
- 24 Cited in Chabod, p.146. See also *Correspondence*, pp. xxvii and 249–50, with his often expressed views that ‘we cannot hope for anything but ill,’ and ‘there will never be any union in Italy that will do any good.’
- 25 See useful accounts of the modern history of the term in Lichtheim and Plamenatz.
- 26 On Marx’s well known dismissal of the notion that ideas can be autonomous, rather than socially determined, see his *The German Ideology* (first pub. 1927) and Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* (1929). Pertinent refutations are still to be found in Russell, pp.787–90, and A.J. Ayer, pp.44–5 and 88f.
- 27 On Popper’s notions of tentative verification and falsifiability, see his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934; trans. 1959), in which it is maintained that hypotheses become testable, or meaningful, only when the conditions of their possible falsification have been established.
- 28 Hook, p.183.
- 29 *Life*, p.247. *Correspondence*, p.412.
- 30 *Correspondence*, pp.412, 561, 565. *Life*, pp.248–50.

I. Machiavelli and the Changing Universe

Notes to Chapter 1: Family and Growing Up

1. *Diary*, pp.35–8.
2. *Ibid.*, p.36; *Life*, pp.2–3.
3. *Diary*, p.38. Villari, pp.218–19.
4. *Diary*, pp.38–40; *Life*, p.2.
5. *Diary*, p.40; Villari, p.220; *Life*, p.2.
6. *Diary*, pp.40–4; Rubenstein, ‘The beginnings of Niccolò Machiavelli’s career in the Florentine Chancery,’ pp.72–91.
7. Cf. *List of Works of Art acquired by the South Kensington Museum during the year 1892*: inv. no. 600–1892, p.79. Painting executed by W.H. Allen. H. 2 ft 7in., W. 24.5 in., Depth 11.75 in. See also Fiona Leslie, p.174.
8. *Diary*, pp.43–4.
9. *Ibid.*, pp.56–7.
10. *Ibid.*, p.57.
11. ‘106. Slavery Legalized,’ *Society*; pp.222–8.
12. ‘83. Sumptuary Legislation,’ *Society*; pp.179–83.
13. Edward Chaney ed., pp.283–5; also 107f.
14. Hibbert, *Medici*, p.23. See also *Florence*, p.285.
15. *Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi*, p.173.

Notes to Chapter 2: Early Education

1. *Diary*, pp.50–1; *Life*, p.3; Grendler, p.43; Black, ‘New Light on Machiavelli’s Education,’ in Marchand ed., *Niccolò Machiavelli, politico, storico, letterato*, pp.391–8.
2. *Florence*, pp.89–91.
3. Armando Verde, pp.535–7.
4. *Diary*, pp.34, 40.
5. Verde, *op. cit.*
6. *Diary*, pp.68, 137–41.
7. *Ibid.*, pp.138, 167–71.
8. *Pliny: Natural History*, p.187.
9. *Ibid.*, p.183.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.183, 185.
11. Lewis, pp.60–9. See also *Diary*, p.139.
12. Lerner intro., *The Prince and The Discourses*, pp.526, 528, 318.
13. *Diary*, 142–4.

Notes to Chapter 3: The Cosmic Package

1. Henry Paolucci ed., St Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, pp.9–10.
2. On the Ptolemaic-Christian model of the universe see also Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp.92–121. On the difficulty of refuting Aristotle even at this time, see Crombie, pp.43–7, 80–4.
3. Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, vol. I, p.97.
4. While there seems little question that spectacles were invented in Florence, and possibly as early as 1284, doubts persist about Salvino as their inventor. See E. Rosen, pp.183–218; also V. Ilardi.
5. *Diary*, pp.144–5.
6. As in his *De montibus, silvis, fontibus, stagnis seu paludibus et de nominibus maris*; also *Diary*, p.146.
7. *Ibid.*, p.147 and n.
8. *Ibid.*

Notes to Chapter 4: Poetry, Music and Militarism

1. *History*, pp.210–18, 222f.
2. F. Guicciardini, *History of Italy*, pp.3–4; Najemy, *ibid.*, pp.291–306; Hibbert, *op. cit.*, pp.107–27.
3. On Chrysoloras see Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People* (vol. 3), *Memoirs*, p.321f.
4. Mönch, pp.82–3.
5. Oppenheimer, *Birth of the Modern Mind*, pp.175–90.
6. On the ratios, see Wittkower, p.30; also Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, pp.189, 20–5.

Notes to Chapter 5: Murder in the Duomo

1. Martines, *April Blood*, pp.111–12.
2. Charles Nicholl, p.215.
3. Peruzzi, pp.27–39. *History*, pp.348–52.
4. Castiglione, p.13.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Hibbert, *op. cit.*, pp.126–7. Proverbio, in Simonetta, *op. cit.* Smith, in J.H. Plumb, *The Italian Renaissance*, p.275f.
7. Smith, *ibid.*; Peruzzi, *op. cit.*; Martelli, in Simonetta, *op. cit.*, pp.41–9.
8. See Simonetta, *op. cit.*, pp.102–6.
9. Cf. Fenucci, in Simonetta, *op. cit.*, pp.88–99.
10. Simonetta, *op. cit.*, pp.185–8.
11. Martines, *op. cit.*, pp.97–9, 107, 152, 158–61, 163–4, 175–6, 209; Plumb, *op. cit.*, pp.93–8. Pastor, pp.198–296.
12. Martines, *op. cit.*, pp.62–82, 93–6; *History*, pp.352–6; Hare, Baddeley, p.63.

12. Martines, *op. cit.*, pp.112–16; Najemy, *op. cit.*, pp.156–7; *Diary*, p.83.
13. Hibbert, *op. cit.* pp.137–40; Martines, *op. cit.*, pp.117–22.
14. *History*, p.356; also on Poliziano, see Watkins, pp.171–83.
15. Martines, *op. cit.*, pp.117–18.
16. Hibbert, *op. cit.*, p.123.
17. Landucci, pp.15–16.
18. *Ibid.*, p.16.
19. *Ibid.*, p.17.
20. *Ibid.*, p.19.
21. Martines's estimate of population, *op. cit.*, p.111.

Notes to Chapter 6: A Boyhood Excursion

1. Frances Winwar trans. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, p. xxvi.
2. *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.
3. *Diary*, pp.63–4.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.49–50.
5. *Ibid.*, pp.47–8.
6. *Ibid.*, p.49; *Life*, p.3.
7. C. Day Lewis trans. *The Georgics of Virgil*, p.11.
8. *Ibid.*, pp.10–11.
9. Hibbert, *op. cit.*, pp.164–5.

Notes to Chapter 7: The Lost Years

1. Hibbert, *op. cit.*, p.159.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Landucci, pp.21, 26.
4. *Diary*, p.124.
5. Mee, *op. cit.*, p.47.
6. *History*, pp.359–61; Landucci, pp.28, 29, 31.
7. Verde, *op. cit.*, p.526; *Diary*, pp.141, 146, 147; *Life*, p.4.
8. *Diary*, p.51; Gilbert, p.321.
9. *Diary*, p.120.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.52, 119f, 172.
11. *Ibid.*, pp.168–9.
12. Goodman, pp.3–4; Brown, in *CM*, p.160; Verde, *op. cit.*, p.537; *History*, p.367.
13. Cf. F.A. Gregg trans. Paulus Iovius, p.124.
14. Cf. Bertelli (1961), pp.544–57; (1964); pp.774–92.
15. Gordon ed.and trans. *Two Renaissance Book Hunters: The Letters of Poggio Bracciolini to Nicolaus de Niccolis*, p.296. Also Goodman, *op. cit.*, p.149.
16. R.E. Latham trans. Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, pp.152–3.

17. *Ibid.*, p.170.
18. *Ibid.*, p.206.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p.215.
21. *Ibid.*, p.251.
22. *Ibid.*, p.255–6.

Notes to Chapter 8: Poetry and the Medici

1. On dating, publication and texts, cf. Martelli (1971), pp.377–405.
2. Cf. Brown intro., Renée Neu Watkins trans., Scala, pp. xi-xii, 158–231. *Diary*, pp.149–52.

Notes to Chapter 9: The Religious Revolution

1. Mee, *op. cit.*, p.113. Weinstein, p.139; Erlanger, p.48; *History*, pp.390–400; Martines, *Savonarola*, pp.8–28.
2. Landucci, p.89.
3. Savonarola, *Selected Writings*, p. xx; Landucci (on crowds), p.89.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Weinstein, pp.212–13; Erlanger, p.51f.
6. Erlanger, pp.57–60; Hibbert, p.181; Martines, *Savonarola*, pp.28–30; Savonarola, *Selected Writings*, p. xxi.
7. Martines, *Savonarola*, p.29–30.
8. Baumgartner, pp.19–21.
9. R. Strong, pp.9–10.
10. Martines, p.35.
11. *Ibid.*, pp.37–8; Hibbert, pp.186–8; Erlanger, p.95.
12. Martines, *Savonarola*, 43f; Villari, p.204.
13. *Erlanger*, p.108.
14. Savonarola, *Selected Writings*, p.69f.
15. *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.
16. Martines, *Savonarola*, p.103.
17. *Ibid.*, pp.115–18; Savonarola, *Selected Writings*, p. xxviiiif.
18. Martines, *Savonarola*, p.90.
19. On segregated crowds, Landucci, p.88; .
20. Martines, *Savonarola*, pp.114, 286; on excommunication, Erlanger, pp.188f.
21. *Ibid.*, pp.287–9.
22. *Correspondence*, p.4f.
23. *Ibid.*, pp.3–6.
24. *Diary*, p.48.
25. *Correspondence*, p.8.
26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, p.10.
29. *Ibid.*

II. *The World of War and Diplomacy*

Notes to Chapter 10: Executions and an Official Appointment

1. Martines, *Savonarola*, p.263; Erlanger, p.266.
2. *Ibid.*, p.267.
3. *Ibid.*, p.264.
4. Martines, *Savonarola.*, p.220f; Erlanger, p.241f.
5. Cited in Martines, *Savonarola*, p.244.
6. Landucci, pp.138–9; cf. also pp.135–6.
7. *Ibid.*, p.142.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, pp.142–3; Martines, *Savonarola*, pp.274–6.
10. Rubenstein, *op. cit.*, p.82f.
11. *Ibid.*, pp.84, 85; *Life*, p.15.
12. Landucci, pp.92f, describes the rapid construction of this chamber ('it will be magnificent').
13. *Correspondence*, pp.4, 6.
14. Cf. Simonetta, *Rinascimento segreto. Il mondo del Segretario da Petrarca a Machiavelli*. Milan, 2004.
15. On the pre-publication history of Machiavelli's letters and other works, see Gerber, esp. Part One, *Die Handschriften* (Part Two: *Die Ausgaben*), with its 147 facsimile-reproductions. Gerber wishes to establish (p.100) grounds for crediting Machiavelli's authorship.
16. On couriers, see *Correspondence*, #89 (p.101); on payments, #121 (p.402); on intercepted mail, #7 (p.17), #17 (p.30).

Notes to Chapter 11: Caterina Sforza and the Crisis at Pisa

1. *Life*, pp.26–7; Johnson, pp.187–8, 150–2.
2. Plumb, *op. cit.*, pp.142–3.
3. *Life*, *op. cit.*
4. Villari, pp.237–8; Bertelli ed., Machiavelli, *Legazione e commissarie*, vol. I, pp.30–1.
5. *Correspondence*, p.19.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, pp.20–1.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Life*, p.27.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.25–6; Villari, p.233.
11. Bertelli ed., Machiavelli, *Arte della Guerra e scritti politici minori*, pp.13–17; see also abbreviated translation in Constantine, pp.349–50.

12. Scala, pp.243–5.
13. *DW*, vol. 3, pp.3–4. Bertelli, *Legazione*, vol. I, pp.11–12.

Notes to Chapter 12: The Military Quandary

1. Landucci, p.146.
2. *Life*, p.28.
3. Landucci, pp.144–5.
4. Bruni, *History of the Florentine People*, vol. 3, p.9.
5. *Ibid.*, p.7.
6. *Ibid.*, p.9.
7. *Life*, p.28; Landucci, p.159.
8. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p.106.
9. Villari, p.241.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.242–4; Landucci, p.162.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Correspondence*, pp.22–3.

Notes to Chapter 13: On the Move with the French King

1. *Diary*, p.160.
2. *Ibid.*, pp.46, 164–5.
3. Cf. Italian in Villari, pp.540–1.
4. *Life*, p.28; *Correspondence*, p.24.
5. Baumgartner, p.65f; Parker, pp.42–5.
6. Baumgartner, pp.55–6, 68–9, 269–70.
7. Simone, *French Renaissance*, pp.93–4 (on the sonnet); Baumgartner, pp.200–7.
8. Johnson, pp.138–41; Bradford, pp.77–9.
9. F. Guicciardini, pp.3–8.
10. On nationalism, cf. Cowan, pp.4–5.
11. *Life*, p.15.
12. *DW*, vol. 3, p.30.
13. *Ibid.*, p.30.
14. *Ibid.*, p.32.
15. *Ibid.*, p.37–8.
16. Villari, p.255.
17. *DW*, *op. cit.*, p.41.
18. *Ibid.*, p.55.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, pp.56, 57.
21. *Correspondence*, pp.26–8.
22. *Ibid.*, pp.31, 32–3.

Notes to Chapter 14: The Long French Patience

1. *Ibid.*, p.33.
2. *DW, op. cit.*, p.110.
3. *Ibid.*, p.111.
4. *Ibid.*, p.126.
5. Basil Bunting trans.
6. Landucci, p.174.

Notes to Chapter 15: Marriage and a Hint of Cesare Borgia

1. *DW, op. cit.*, p.140.
2. *Ibid.*, p.125.
3. Johnson, p.152.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.152–5; Bradford, pp.83–5.
5. *Diary*, p.162; *Correspondence*, p.450; *Life*, p.46.
6. *Correspondence*, p.42.

Notes to Chapter 16: Meeting the Captain-General

1. Landucci, pp.177–8.
2. *Correspondence*, p.38.
3. *DW, op. cit.* p.135.
4. Herlihy, p.203.
5. Villari, pp.263–4; *Life*, pp.44–5.
6. *DW, op. cit.*, summarized on pp.145–6.
7. Landucci, p.181f.
8. *Correspondence*, p.45f.
9. Bertelli, *op. cit.*, pp.262–3.
10. *Ibid.*, p.263.
11. *Ibid.*, p.262.
12. *History*, pp.406–7.
13. Bertelli, *op. cit.*, pp.267–8.
14. *Life*, p.49.
15. Bertelli, *op. cit.*, p.267.
16. *Life*, p.51.

Notes to Chapter 17: Investigating the Sources of Power

1. Cf. also *History*, p.407, which emphasizes the ambiguous influences surrounding his election.

2. *Correspondence*, p.58.
3. *DW, op. cit.*, p.144.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp.144–5.
6. Nicholl, p.344f.
7. *Ibid.*, p.347.
8. *Ibid.*, p.348; Masters, p.87f.
9. *DW, op. cit.*, letters XXVI, p.215f.
10. *Ibid.*, p.151.
11. *Ibid.*, p.153.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*

Notes to Chapter 18: Retribution and Dominance

1. *Correspondence*, p.52.
2. *Ibid.*, p.55.
3. Landucci, pp.196–7, 201.
4. *DW, op. cit.*, p.223.
5. *Ibid.*, p.239.
6. *Ibid.*, p.245.
7. *Correspondence*, p.59.
8. *DW, op. cit.*, p.146.
9. *Ibid.*, p.150.
10. *Ibid.*, p.242.
11. *Ibid.*, p.220.
12. *Ibid.*, p.222.
13. *Ibid.*, p.257.
14. *Ibid.*, p.259.
15. *Correspondence*, p.79.
16. *Ibid.*, p.78.
17. *DW, op. cit.*, p.259.
18. *Ibid.*, pp.259–60.
19. *Ibid.*, p.261.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p.263.

Notes to Chapter 19: Plans to Change the Arno

1. *Ibid.*
2. Burchard, p.216.
3. *DW*, p.268.

4. *Ibid.*, p.269.
5. *Ibid.*, p.280.
6. *Life*, pp.65f.
7. Bertelli ed., *Arte della guerra e scritte politici minori*, pp.57f; Gilbert trans., vol. 3, pp.1439f.
8. *Ibid.*, p.1440.
9. *Ibid.*, p.1443.
10. Constantine trans., p.370.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p.371–2.
13. Nicholl, p.417.
14. Leonardo, *Notebooks*, vol. II; p.388.
15. Nicholl, pp.357–8.
16. Masters, p.101.
17. Nicholl, p.358f.
18. *Ibid.*, pp.358–9; *Notebooks, op. cit.*, p.438.
19. Burchard, pp.220f.
20. *Ibid.*, p.211.

Notes to Chapter 20: The First Journey to Rome

1. Nicholl, p.371; Bull, pp.58–9.
2. Nicholl, *op. cit.*; Bull, p.59.
3. Nicholl, p.373.
4. *Notebooks*, vol. III, p.45.
5. Johnson, pp.180–1.
6. Burchard, pp.225–6.
7. *Ibid.*, p.221.
8. Vasari, vol. II, p.83; Gregorovius, pp.132f.
9. *DW, op. cit.*, p.284.
10. *Ibid.*, p.296.
11. Johnson, p.181; Bradford, p.209.
12. *DW, op. cit.*, p.296.
13. *Correspondence*, p.86.

Notes to Chapter 21: Cesare's Downfall and the First Decennale

1. *DW, op. cit.*, p.300.
2. *Ibid.*, pp.326–7, 320.
3. *Ibid.*, p.309.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.336, 338.
5. *Ibid.*, p.345.
6. *Ibid.*, p.334.

7. *Ibid.*, p.342.
8. *Correspondence*, p.93.
9. *DW*, *op. cit.* p.364.
10. Nicholl, p.379.
11. Bull, pp.58–60.
12. *Rime*, G.R. Ceriello ed., p.139.
13. Gilbert, III, p.1444.
14. *History*, pp.410–11; *Life*, pp.79–80.
15. *DW*, *op. cit.*, p.389.
16. *Life*, p.79.
17. Constantine trans., pp.355–6.
18. *DW*, *op. cit.*, pp.396–7.
19. *Correspondence*, p.101.
20. *Ibid.*, p.102.
21. Nicholl, pp.384–5.
22. *Correspondence*, pp.106–7.
23. *Ibid.*, p.118.
24. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p.1457.
25. *Ibid.*, p.1445.
26. *Ibid.*, p.1446.
27. *Ibid.*, p.1450.
28. *Ibid.*, p.1445.
29. *Ibid.*, p.1457.
30. *Ibid.*, p.1454.

Notes to Chapter 22: Anarchy and the Citizen Militia

1. Johnson, p.184; Bradford, 236.
2. Ruggiero, in Crum and Paoletti eds, *Renaissance Florence: A Social History*, pp.304–7.
3. *Correspondence*, p.102.
4. *Life*, p.87; *History*, p.411.
5. Cowell, p.37.
6. *DW*, IV, pp.4, and see also p.3.
7. Landucci, p.218.
8. Baumgartner, p.55.
9. *Correspondence*, p.116.
10. *DW*, *op. cit.*, pp.10–11.
11. *Ibid.*, p.20.
12. *Ibid.*, p.36.
13. *Correspondence*, p.134.
14. *Ibid.*, p.135.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.135–6.
16. Gilbert, II, pp.745–9.

17. *Ibid.*, p.747.
18. Hibbert, p.202.

Notes to Chapter 23: The German Enigma

1. *DW, op. cit.*, pp.126f.
2. Cf. especially Waas, pp.23–72, 87f.
3. *Ibid.*, pp.101–2.
4. *DW, op. cit.*, p.82.
5. *Ibid.*, p.87.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.396–7.
7. *Ibid.*, p.398f.
8. *Ibid.*, p.89.
9. *Ibid.*, p.126.
10. Bradford, p.270; Johnson, p.186.
11. *DW, op. cit.*, pp.148, 153.

Notes to Chapter 24: Victory at Pisa

1. *Ibid.*, p.156.
2. Landucci, p.231.
3. *DW, op. cit.*, pp.165f.
4. *Ibid.*, p.178.
5. *Ibid.*, p.184.
6. Landucci, p.234.
7. *Correspondence*, p.180.
8. *Ibid.*, pp.182, 183.
9. See discussion of Poggio's *Facetiae* in Oppenheimer trans., *Eulenspiegel*, p. liii.
10. Constantine trans., pp.381–5.

Notes to Chapter 25: A Government Overthrown

1. *History*, p.413.
2. On the twentieth he wrote, 'I shall mount my horse and proceed ... to Verona, ... where all lies originate, or rather where it rains lies' (*DW, op. cit.* p.202).
3. *Ibid.*, pp.203–4.
4. *Correspondence*, p.190; *Lettere*, pp.321–3.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Metamorphoses*, I, 7, pp.16–19. Cf. Thompson, pp.193, 203f., 259, 282 on the folktale motifs.

8. *Correspondence*, p.191.
9. Gilbert, II, p.738.
10. *Ibid.*, p.735.
11. *Correspondence*, p.192.
12. *Ibid.*, p.193.
13. F. Guicciardini, p.208; *DW, op. cit.*, p.220.
14. *Ibid.*, pp.243–4.
15. *Correspondence*, pp.204–5.
16. *Ibid.*, p.208.
17. *Ibid.*
18. F. Guicciardini, pp.212–15.
19. *Correspondence*, p.195; *Life*, pp.121f.
20. Landucci, pp.247–8.
21. *Ibid.*, p.255.
22. F. Guicciardini, pp.259–60.
23. *Ibid.*, pp.262–3; Landucci, pp.256–7.
24. *History*, p.421; F. Guicciardini, pp.263–4.

III. Into a Tuscan Exile

Notes to Chapter 26: *The Aftermath of Freedom*

1. Landucci, pp.258–9.
2. *Ibid.*, p.261; *History*, pp.424–5; see also Machiavelli's description of the disaster at Prato and subsequent events in *Correspondence*, pp.214–17.
3. F. Guicciardini, p.266.
4. *Correspondence*, p.424.
5. Bertelli ed., *op. cit.*, pp.219–27.
6. Devonshire Jones, *Vettori*, p.104; Butters, 'Machiavelli and the Medici,' in *CM*, pp.65–6.
7. On the remodelling, see Landucci, pp.264–5.
8. Butters, p.67; *Life*, p.135; *History*, pp.426–7.
9. Vasari, vol. II, pp.109–10.
10. *Correspondence*, p.497.
11. Landucci, p.266.
12. The Dazzo referred to is apparently a second-rate writer apprenticed to Marcello Virgilio. Both sonnets, discovered only in 1828, remain controversial, though their authenticity is not disputed. Cf. *Life*, pp.136–8; Gilbert, II, pp.1013–14; Ascoli and Capodivacca in *CM*, p.203; Villari, vol. II, pp.36–7, 541.
13. F. Guicciardini, pp.272–3.
14. Landucci, pp.267–8.
15. *Correspondence*, p.221.
16. See *Diary*, p.162.
17. *Correspondence*, pp.222–3.

Notes to Chapter 27: Making History at Sant'Andrea

1. Hare, *Florence*, p.233.
2. Landucci, p.269.
3. *Correspondence*, p.225.
4. *Ibid.*, p.237.
5. *Ibid.*, p.249.
6. Constantine trans., p.105.
7. Ogilvie intro., *Livy*, pp.8, 9–10.
8. Villari, II, pp.97–9; but see also Najemy in *CM*, pp.96–9.
9. Lerner, *op. cit.*, p.129.
10. *Ibid.*, p.131.
11. *Ibid.*, pp.147, 146.
12. *Ibid.*, pp.185–6.
13. *Ibid.*, p.215.
14. *Ibid.*, pp.256, 257.
15. *Correspondence*, p.244.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, pp.260–1.
18. *Ibid.*, p.263.
19. *Ibid.*, p.264.
20. Clough, pp.13–14.
21. *Correspondence*, *op. cit.*

Notes to Chapter 28: Power and Memory

1. Bull trans., p.32.
2. *Correspondence*, p.276.
3. Adams trans., p.35.
4. *Ibid.*, p.48.
5. *Ibid.*, p.50.
6. *Ibid.*, p.72.
7. *Ibid.*, p.73.
8. See Gilbert, II, p.1015; *Life*, p.140.
9. *CM*, pp.194, 208; *Life*, pp.174–5; Shell in Sullivan ed., *Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli*, pp.80f.

Notes to Chapter 29: The Ambush of Love

1. *Correspondence*, p.293.
2. *Ibid.*, p.278.
3. *Ibid.*, pp.311–12.

4. *Ibid.*, p.301.
5. Gilbert, III, pp.1457–62.
6. *Life*, p.168; *Correspondence*, pp.309, 318.
7. Constantine trans., pp.222, 223.
8. *Ibid.*, p.232; Lerner, *op. cit.*, p.540.
9. Landucci, pp.274–6.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.279–85; Symonds, *Shakespeare's Predecessors*, p.325.

Notes to Chapter 30: Literary Adventures

1. *Correspondence*, pp.314, 315, 318.
2. Gilbert, II, p.772; cf. Ascoli and Capodivacca, *op. cit.*, pp.198–204; also Harvey in Sullivan ed., *op. cit.*, pp.120–37.
3. Constantine trans., p.401.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Hale trans., p.188; also cited by Saxonhouse in Sullivan ed., *op. cit.*, p.58.
6. *Ibid.*, p.57; see also Duerr, *Acting*, pp.89f.
7. Leonardo, *Notebooks*, III, p.179; Nicholl, p.258.
8. Constantine trans., pp.441, 447.
9. *Ibid.*, p.475.
10. *Ibid.*, p.438.
11. *Ibid.*, p.461.
12. *Ibid.*, p.465, 467.
13. *Ibid.*, p.436.

Notes to Chapter 31: Reflecting on the Craft of War

1. Waas, *op. cit.*, p.87f.
2. Hibbert, p.235.
3. Farnworth trans., Neal Wood rev., p.7.
4. *Ibid.*, p.10.
5. *Ibid.*, xx.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.17–20.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. xlv-li.
8. *Ibid.*, p.19.
9. *Ibid.*, p.40 and n.
10. *Ibid.*, p.210.
11. *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.
12. *Correspondence*, p.325.
13. On the historical Castruccio, see *History*, pp.121–3.
14. Constantine trans., pp.406–7.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.418–22.

Notes to Chapter 32: The Dream of History

1. *Correspondence*, pp.329, 534–5.
2. Constantine trans., pp.317–18.
3. *Correspondence*, p.328; Constantine trans., p.428.
4. *Correspondence*, pp.331–2, 334.
5. *Ibid.*, p.332; *Life*, pp.186f.
6. On private reading, see Cameron in Pettegree ed., *Early Reformation*, p.196; on Italy, see *ibid.*, pp.188f.
7. *Correspondence*, pp.335, 336.
8. *Ibid.*, p.341.
9. *Ibid.*, p.342.
10. Cf. also *Life*, p.197.; Cabrini in *CM*, pp.133–4.
11. Marriott trans., *Florentine History*, p.7.
12. Constantine trans., p.318.
13. Marriott trans., *op. cit.*, p.8.
14. *Ibid.*, pp.13–14.
15. *Ibid.*, p.78, 85, 131.
16. *Ibid.*, pp.370–1.
17. *Ibid.*, p.416.

Notes to Chapter 33: Lights before the Storm

1. F. Guicciardini, pp.327–38; Hibbert, pp.236–8.
2. *Correspondence*, p.355.
3. *Ibid.*, p.357.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.339, 345, 539, 349.
5. *Ibid.*, p.345; *Life*, p.203.
6. Gilbert, I, pp.106, 115; Bertelli ed., *Arte della guerra e scritti politici minori*, I, p.277.
7. *Correspondence*, p.351; *Life*, pp.207–8.
8. *Correspondence*, p.354.
9. Evans trans., p.25; on the theatrical tradition, see also Faulkner in Sullivan ed., p.39.
10. *Correspondence*, pp.358, 363, 364–5, 367, 368.

Notes to Chapter 34: The Assault on Rome and a Fatal Illness

1. *Ibid.*, p.360.
2. *Ibid.*, p.372.
3. *Ibid.*, p.378.
4. Waldman trans., *Orlando Furioso*, p.402.
5. F. Guicciardini, p.345.
6. *History*, p.447.

7. *Life*, pp.224–5; *Correspondence*, pp.379, 551.
8. Hibbert, p.248.
9. *Ibid.*, p.242; *Life*, p.234; for Machiavelli's view of him, cf. *Correspondence*, p.382.
10. *Life*, pp.230–1, 323n.
11. *Correspondence*, pp.385–6, 386–7.
12. *Ibid.*, pp.376–7; F. Guicciardini, pp.373–5.
13. *History*, pp.448–9.
14. *Correspondence*, pp.393, 395.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.413–14.
16. *Ibid.*, p.416.
17. For contemporary thinking along these apocalyptic lines, see F. Guicciardini, pp.376, 385–6, 389.
18. *History*, p.452; *Life*, p.248; Villari, II, p.503.
19. *Correspondence*, pp.561, 417.
20. *Ibid.*, p.425.

IV. Epilogue

1. On evil conceived in this way, see Oppenheimer, *Evil and the Demonic*, pp. ix-x, 1–11.
2. Villari, *op. cit.*, p.505; *Life*, pp.249–50.
3. Adams trans., pp.227–38.
4. Keane, *Paine*, p.97.
5. *Ibid.*, p.295.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.435f.

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Machiavelli has always attracted considerable scholarly and critical attention. Silvia Ruffo-Fiore reports on more than 3,000 books and articles devoted to his life and works in modern times alone. Since 1988, when her list breaks off (see below: it begins in 1935) at least 1,500 more may confidently be said to have been added to the total. Like their predecessors, many are fascinating and original. The list presented here thus includes a mere fraction of the scholarly-critical enterprise to date, or those books and articles which have seemed essential to the present effort.

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Index

- Acciaiuoli, Roberto 214
Achilles 99
Acton, John Emerich Edward Dalberg
(1834–1902) xxii
Adrian VI, Pope 275
Adriani, Marcello Virgilio (?1460–1521) 56,
95, 227
Aeneas 116
Aesop (?6th cent. BCE) 32
Agniolo de Castellani 3
Alamanni, Ludovico 252
Alamanni, Luigi 277, 291
Alamanni, Piero 222, 250
Alaric (c.370–410) 145
Alberti, Leon Battista (1404–72) 249
Albizzi, Lucas degli 110, 111
Albret, Charlotte d' 109
allegory 17, 102
Alexander VI, Pope (Rodrigo Borgia) 78,
109, 121, 124, 125, 129, 130, 142, 143, 147,
154, 156, 159–60, 163–4, 166, 168
Amboise, Georges d', Cardinal (1460–1510)
113, 118, 176
Ambrose, St (c.339–97) 27, 35
Angelico, Fra (Guido di Pietro, c.1400–55)
6, 66
Anne of Brittany 193
Antinori, Tommaso 125
Apollo 64, 65
Appiano, Jacopo IV d' 96, 98, 176, 178, 200
Apuleius, Lucius (2nd cent.) 208, 253
Aquinas, St Thomas (1225–74) 76
Aragon, Frederick of 126
Aragona (family) 110
Archimedes (c.287–212 BCE) 157
Ariosto, Ludovico (1474–1533) 153, 252,
257, 283
Aristotle (384–322 BCE) 15, 17, 28, 75, 235
Armato, Salvino d' 22
Augustine, St (354–430) 19, 27, 76
Augustus, Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus
(63 BCE–14 AD) 234, 261
Avalos, Ferrante Francesco de 282
Baglioni, Gian[m]paolo 136, 171, 189, 237
Baldung-Grien, Hans (c.1476–1545) 203
Bandello, Matteo 286
Bandino, Bernardo (conspirator) 43
Baroncelli, Bernardo Bandini 39, 40, 273
Battista di Filippo da Poppi (teacher) 14, 16
Becchi, Ricciardo 77–80
Benedetto da Maiano 88
Benizzi, Giovanni (uncle) 184
Benizzi, Lionarda di Niccolò 46
Benizzi, Matteo di Piero 5
Benizzi, Niccolò di Girolamo di Niccolò 46
Benozzi, Alunno di 35
Bentivogli, Giovanni 152
Bentivoglio, Ercule 179
Bernardino, Fra 9
Berruguete, Pedro 34
Betto, Bernardo di (Pinturicchio) 164
Bidoni, Alessandro 284
Biondo, Flavio (*d.*1463) 23–4, 270
Bismarck, Otto Edward Leopold von
(1815–98) xx
Bisticci, Vespasiano da 34
Boccaccio, Giovanni 23, 44–5, 190, 208, 254

- Bodin, Jean (1530–96) xxii
- Boethius, Anicius Manlius Severinus (c.480–524) 190
- Borgia (family) 170
 Cesare 93, 109, 110, 115, 117, 118, 120, 121–3, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129–32, 134–6, 137–9, 141–9, 150–2, 153, 154–6, 159–60, 163–5, 166, 167, 168–70, 175, 179, 180, 181, 186, 189, 197–8, 237, 241, 243, 244, 265, 266, 298
 Juan 121
 Lucrezia 136, 159, 164, 198
 Luis 181
- Boscoli, Piero Antoni 224–5, 226
- Botticelli, Sandro xv, 37, 62, 70, 76
- Bourbon,, Charles, Duke of (1490–1527) xiv, xv, xvii, xx, 287, 288, 289
- Braccesi, Alexandri 89
- Bracciolini, Jacopo di Poggio 39–40, 41
- Brandano xix
- Brunelleschi, Filippo (1377–1446) 12, 24, 71, 251, 298
- Bruni, Leonardo (1370–1444) 24, 102, 155, 185, 236, 267, 270, 271, 273
- Buonaccorsi, Biagio (1472–1525) 94, 95, 114, 140, 146, 167, 187, 210
- Buondelmonti, Zanobi (1491–1527) 249, 268, 277, 290
- Burchard, Johann (?1450–1506) 163
- Burke, Edmund (1729–97) xxii
- Caesar, Gaius Julius (100/102–44 BCE) 57, 110, 196
- Caesars 261
- Cambrai, League of 205
- Cancellieri (family) 125, 127
- Capponi, Agostino 224–5, 226
- Capponi, Gino 271
- Carafa, Diomedede 238
- Cardona, Raimondo da 216, 217
- Carvajal, Bernardino 194
- Carvajal, Maximilian 181
- Casa, Francesco della 112, 113, 114
- Casavecchia, Filippo 202
- Castiglione, Baldesar (1478–1529) 32–3
- Castracani, Castruccio 273 *see under* Machiavelli: works
- Catullus, Gaius Valerius (c.84–c.54 BCE) 27
- Cavalcanti, Bartolomeo (1503–62) 287
- Cavalcanti, Giovanni 271
- Cellini, Benvenuto (1500–71) xv–xvii, 157
- Cellini, Giovanni di Andrea 157
- Cerretani, Bartolomeo 217
- change, motion, in Livy 234–5
 in Lucretius 60, 61
 as Renaissance topics xi, 157, 162, 174, 234–8, 244, 245, 246, 250, 271, 272–4, 296–7, 298
- Charles (nephew of Louis XII) 180
- Charles V (Holy Roman Emperor, King of Spain; 1500–58) xiv, xxiv, 214, 260, 269, 275, 276, 282, 283, 284, 287
- Charles VII (of France 1403–61) 187
- Charles VIII (of France 1470–98) 70, 71–3, 84, 86, 89, 108, 164, 175, 179, 193, 213
- Chaucer, Geoffrey (c.1345–1400) 23, 190, 208
- Christina, Queen of Sweden (1626–89) xx
- Chrysoloras, Manuel (c.1355–1415) 26
- Ciango d'Agnolo (of Castellani, d.1393) 3
- Cibo, Innocenzo, Cardinal (1491–1550) xviii 250
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius (106–43 BCE) 54, 58, 187
- Circe 253
- Clausiwitz, Karl 262
- Clemenceau, Georges (1841–1929) xx
- Clement VII, Pope *see under* Medici
- Cocles, Horatius xvii
- Cognac, League of 283, 284, 286, 287, 288
- Colonna (family) 164, 287
 Fabrizio 259, 260, 262
 Pompeo, Cardinal (d.1532) xvii
- Columbino (engineer) 177, 178
- Columbus, Cristoforo (1451–1506) 94
- Córdoba, Gonzalvo Fernández da, Grand Captain 176
- Corsini, Marietta *see under* Machiavelli

- Corsini, Ludovico 123
 Cosimo, Piero di 225
 Crinito, Pietro 55
- Dacres, Edward 296
 Daniel 106, 107
 Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) xxiv, 26, 29, 55, 95, 107, 145, 172, 179, 227, 232, 239, 245–6, 272, 297
 Danton, Georges Jacques (1759–94) xxii
 Darwin, Charles (1809–82) 242
 David (biblical King) 225
 Dazzo, Andrea 227
 Diogenes Laertius 268
 Dioscorides, Pedanius 56
 Disviri, Monsignore de 195
 Donatello (c.1386–1466) 37
 Donati, Corso 273
 Donatus, Aelius (4th cent.) 11
 Donne, John (?1572–1631) 296
 Doria, Andrea (c.1466–1560) xxiv, 290
 Dostoyevski, Fyodor (1821–81) 227
 Dumas (father and son) 152
 Dürer, Albrecht (1471–1528) 193, 203
- Engels, Friedrich (1820–95) xxii
 Epicurus (341–271 BCE) 57, 59
 Este (family) 110
 Isabella d' 217
 Etruscans 47, 87, 165, 190
 Eulenspiegel, Till 40, 203, 204, 265
 evil xiii, 201, 226, 243, 244, 295
- Fabius (Quintus Fabius Ruillianus, 4th cent. BCE) 250
 Falconetti, Jacopo di Filippo 277–8, 288
 Fama 65
 Faust legend 193
 Fecini, Luca 94
 Ferdinand II of Aragon 181, 182
 Felice (daughter of Julius II) 228
 Felici, Piero 35
 Feo, Giacomo 93
 Fermo, Oliverotto da 136, 146, 147, 156
- Ferrante of Aragon (1423–94) King of Naples 51, 53
 Ferrara, Giuglio xvii
 Fichte, Johann Gottlieb (1762–1814) xx
 Ficino, Marcello 49, 56, 71, 76
 Flaminius, Gaius 115
 Florence xxiv, 44–5, 52, 53, 55, 56, 63, 68, 73, 74, 75, 83, 87–9, 93, 97, 98, 101, 102, 109, 112, 113, 114, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130–1, 133–5, 136, 138, 141, 148, 152, 153–5, 159, 163, 173, 174, 176, 178–80, 182–4, 186, 188, 192, 196, 199–200, 203–4, 205, 208, 209, 211, 213, 216, 217, 218, 221, 225, 230, 233, 237, 240, 247, 248, 249, 255, 262, 264, 265, 267, 268, 273, 278, 279, 282, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 295
 Florus, Publius Annius (2nd cent.) 234, 239
Fortuna 16, 55, 64, 104, 130, 131, 132, 151, 159, 161, 189–91, 192, 206, 231, 234, 244, 248, 250, 252, 266, 283, 290, 298
 Francis I of France (1494–1527) 259, 283
 Franciscans 268–9
 Franklin, Benjamin (1706–90) xxii
 Frederick the Great (1712–86) xx
 Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194–1250) 28
 Freud, Sigmund (1856–1939) xxii, 29
 Frontinus, Sextus Julius (c.40–103) 185
 Frundsberg, Georg von (1473–1528) xiv, 285
- Gaddiano, Antonio 172
 Galileo (1564–1642) xi, 245
 Gallerani, Cecilia 157
 Gandhi, Mohandās Karamchand (1869–1948) 68
 Ghibellines 6, 13
 Ghiberti, Lorenzo (1378–1455) 6
 Ghirlandaio, Domenico (1449–94) 14, 37
 Giotto (DI BONDONE, c.1266–1337) 12
 Giovio, Paolo (1483–1552) 56
 Girolami, Giovanni 214
 Giuliano da Maiano 88
 Giunta, Filippo di 270
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von (1749–1832) 280

- Gonzalo (Spanish commander) 181
 Gozzoli, Benozzo 6, 9, 66, 245
 Greene, Robert (1558–92) 296
 Gregory I, Pope 35
 Grüninger, Johannes 203
 Guelfs (Parte Guelfa) 6, 13
 Guicciardini, Francesco (1483–1540) xx,
 xxiv, 84, 155, 186, 188, 206, 216, 217, 259,
 269, 270, 275, 276, 280, 281, 282, 284, 286,
 288, 289, 290, 291
 Guicciardini, Luigi (1478–1551) xiv, xviii, xx,
 206, 207, 208, 209
 Guicciardini, Piero 186, 193, 222
 Guiducci, Francesco 158
 Guinigi (family) 265
 Michele 264
 Pagolo 266
- Hamilton, Alexander (1757–1804) xxii
 Hamlet 184
 Hannibal (247–182 BCE) 190
 Hawthorne, Nathaniel (1804–64) 165
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1770–
 1831) xx
 Henry VIII (1491–1547) xviii, 231, 232, 284
 Hercules xvii
 Herodian (170–240) 239
 Hitler, Adolf (1889–1945) xx, 68, 261
 Hobbes, Thomas (1588–1679) xxii
 Homer (8th cent. BCE) 25
 Huguenots 296
 humanism 24, 25–6, 56, 58, 61, 66, 108, 194,
 203, 233, 241, 256, 260, 272, 290
 Hume, David (1711–76) xxii
 Hyacinth 64, 65, 66
- Ignatius [of] Loyola, St (1491–1556) 296
- Jaurès, Jean (1859–1914) xxii
 Jeanne (courtesan at Lyons) 214
 Jefferson, Thomas (1743–1826) xxii, 68, 298
 Jerome, St (c.342–420) 17
 Jews 76
 John the Baptist (c.27) 77
- Jonson, Ben (1572–1637) 296
 Juliet 184
 Julius II, Pope 163, 165, 166, 167, 168, 170,
 171, 172, 181, 186, 189, 192, 197, 205, 211,
 213, 214, 215, 228, 237, 248, 249
 Justinus, Marcus Junianus (3rd cent.) 54
 Juvenal (Decimus Junius Juvenalis,
 c.55–c.140) 27, 208
- Khan, Genghis 255
 Keats, John (1795–1821) 28
- Landino, Cristoforo 55
 Landucci, Luca (*d.*1516) 40, 41, 52, 53, 69,
 84–5, 101, 105, 119, 125, 128, 141, 178, 186,
 187, 201, 215, 216, 217, 218
 Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich (1870–1924) xx, 68
 Lentino, Giacomo da (1188–1240) 27, 28
 Leo X, Pope *see under* Medici
 Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) 29, 30, 32,
 43, 137–8, 152–3, 156–9, 161–3, 171, 172,
 175, 177, 178, 184, 221, 245, 256
 Lippi, Domenico 17
 Lippi, [Fi]Lippo, Fra (c.1406–69) 217
 Livy (Titus Livius, 59 BCE–17) 17–18, 19, 22,
 23, 32, 54, 55, 185, 233, 234–5, 239, 270
 Locke, John (1632–1704) xxii
 Lorenzo (merchant) 140
 Lorqua, Ramiro 144–5
 Louis VII of France (c.1120–80) 254
 Louis XII of France 105, 107–9, 110, 111,
 112, 113, 114, 115, 117, 118, 121, 126, 128,
 129, 130, 132, 141, 142, 143, 148, 154, 164,
 167, 176, 177, 179, 180, 197, 205, 211, 213,
 214, 215, 232, 237, 259
 Lucifer 145, 296
 Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus, c.99–55
 BCE) 54, 57, 58–61, 203
 Lucrezia (courtesan) 214, 247
 Luther, Martin (1483–1546) xx, 80, 214, 269,
 275, 285
- Macbeth 184
 Machiavel, Machiavellian 295–6

- Machiavelli, Alessandro di Filippo 5, 13–14, 87
- Machiavelli, Bartolomea (mother) 5, 6, 46, 78
- Machiavelli, Bartolomea (daughter) 229, 291
- Machiavelli, Battista 167
- Machiavelli, Bernardo (son) 167, 171, 229, 280, 286, 291
- Machiavelli, messer Bernardo (father) 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 16–18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 28, 32, 44, 45–6, 51, 53, 54, 55, 56, 66, 67, 106–7, 120, 210, 229, 233
- Machiavelli, Buoninsegna (mid-13th cent.) 3
- Machiavelli, Buoninsegna di Guido 46
- Machiavelli, Donno 3
- Machiavelli, Francesco, d'Agnolo 4
- Machiavelli, Giovanni d'Agnolo 13
- Machiavelli, Giovanni di Primavera 117, 120
- Machiavelli, Girolamo d'Agnolo 4–5
- Machiavelli, Guido (son) 229, 288, 291
- Machiavelli, Lodovico (son) 229, 276, 280, 291
- Machiavelli, Margherita (sister) 6, 46, 47, 106
- Machiavelli, Marietta (Corsini, wife) 123, 140, 146, 152, 167, 170–1, 229, 289, 291
- Machiavelli, Niccolò d'Alessandro 8
- Machiavelli, Niccolò di messer Bernardo
 affair with Barbara Fiorentina *see* Salutati, Barbara Raffacani
 appearance xxiv–v
 birth 3, 6
 children 229, 238, 291
 commanding militia 199, 200–1, 202, 223, 224, 243
 copying classics 57–8 *see also* Terence; Lucretius
 death xiii, xxiv, 291, 295
 dismissal from office 224
 government career xxii, xxiv, xxiv, 83, 86–7, 89, 90–1, 104–5, 111–14, 117, 118, 125–7, 129–31, 132, 134–6, 138, 141, 143–4, 151, 153, 158, 168, 175–6, 177, 178, 188–9, 195, 200, 201, 205, 206, 222–3, 231, 268, 280, 283
 illness xxi, xxiv, 198, 288, 291
 imprisonment and torture 225–7
 recruiting troops 175, 179, 181, 184–8, 215, 216, 262, 275
 on Savonarola 78–80
 works:
Art of War xxii, xxiv, 259–63, 270, 282, 286
Belfagor 254–5
Capitolo/di Fortuna 189–90, 191
Castruccio Castracani of Lucca, The Life of 264–6, 268, 273
 'Caution to the Medici Faction' [*Ai Palleschi*] 223
Clizia 277, 278–80
Decennale Primo 175, 177, 178–80, 189, 233
Decennale Secondo 233, 249
Dell'Ambizione 209–10
Dell'Asino (The Ass) 252–3
De natura Gallorum [On the French] 176
Discorso dell'ordinare lo stato di Firenze alle armi [On the military organization of the State of Florence] 187
Discorso . . . intorno alla nostra lingua [On Tuscan] 245–6
Discorso . . . sopra le cose di Pisa [On Pisa] 96–7
Discourses on Livy xxii, 233–8, 241, 244, 249, 296
Discursus florentinarum rerum (Discourse on Florentine Affairs after the Death of the Younger Lorenzo) 277
Eunuchus 256
Florentine Histories xxii, 267–8, 270–4, 275, 276, 296, 298
Ghiribizzi [fantasies on *Fortuna*] 189–91
 'How Duke Valentino Killed the Generals Who Conspired Against Him,' 155–6
 [Letter about aged prostitute] 206–9
Mandragola, La xxiv, 256, 257–8, 264, 277, 278, 281, 284
Maschere, Le (The Masks) 256

- The Prince* xxi, xxii, 238, 240, 241–5, 246, 247, 248, 259, 295–6
- ‘Rules for an Elegant Social Circle’ 203–4
- ‘Second Report on the Affairs of Germany’ 196–7
- Sonnets
to Bernardo Machiavelli 106–7
to Giuliano di Lorenzo de Medici 62–5, 226–8, 245
on Love as thief 248
- ‘Words to be spoken on the Law for Appropriating Money,’ 153–5
- Machiavelli *palazzo* 6–8, 24
- Machiavelli, Paolo di Giovanni 5, 87
- Machiavelli, Piero d’Agnolo 4, 5
- Machiavelli, Piero di Niccolò (son) 291
- Machiavelli, Primavera (sister) 6, 46, 55, 106, 117, 120
- Machiavelli, Primerana (daughter) 132, 229
- Machiavelli, Totto (brother) 6, 46, 47, 54, 106, 114, 117, 123, 214, 276
- Machiavelli, Totto di Niccolò (son) 291
- Macrobius, Ambrosius Theodosius (5th cent.) 16–17
- Maffei 39
- Magi 245
- Majo 238
- Malchiavello 3
- Mandelstam, Osip (1891–1938) 227
- Mandeville, John (14th cent.) 32
- Manetti, Giovanni 284
- Manuzio, Aldo 125
- Mao Tse-tung (1893–1976) 68
- Marciano, Rimiccio da 103
- Marciano, Rinuccio da, Count 98
- Mariscotta (courtesan) 276
- Marlowe, Christopher (1564–93) 193, 296
- Mars 179
- Martial (Marcus Valerius Martialis, c.40–c.104) 55
- Marx, Karl (1818–83) xxii
- Masaccio 21
- Matteo della Rocca 13
- Maximilian I, King of Germany 193–8, 202, 205, 211, 213, 215, 249, 259
- Medici (family) 5, 6, 7, 32, 34, 37, 40, 67, 72, 74, 89, 180, 192, 215, 216, 218, 222, 223, 224, 245, 248, 265, 271, 276, 285, 287
Alessandro di Lorenzo (?) 285
Clarice di Piero 224, 285
Cosimo de’ 25, 49, 103
Giovanni de’ (delle Bande Neri) 285, 286
Giovanni di Lorenzo (1475–1521),
Cardinal, then Pope Leo X xviii, 70, 192, 205, 215, 217, 218, 221, 222, 224, 225, 228, 229, 230, 238, 248, 250–1, 255, 263, 264, 267, 269, 276, 277, 278, 285
Giovanni di Pierfrancesco de’ 93
Giuliano di Lorenzo (*d.1516*) 63, 64, 65, 67, 192, 221, 224, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 239, 242, 245, 248, 249, 259
Giuliano di Piero (1453–78) 31, 36, 38, 39, 40, 71, 273
Giulio de’ (1478–1534), Pope Clement VII xv, xvi, xvii, xix, xx, xxiv, 73, 88, 230, 238, 259, 260, 263, 267, 269, 275, 276, 277, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 288, 289, 290
Ippolito di Giuliano(?) 285
Lorenzo de’ (nephew of Giovanni di Lorenzo) 230–1, 242, 248, 249, 250, 259
Lorenzo (il Magnifico) di Piero (1449–92) 25, 31, 33, 34, 36, 38, 40, 41, 42, 49, 51–4, 62, 66, 70–1, 109, 208, 273–4
Lucrezia di Lorenzo (il Magnifico) 270
Pierfrancesco de’ 52
Piero (Pietro) di Cosimo 25, 40, 66
Piero di Lorenzo 70, 71, 72–3, 84, 103, 115, 126, 128, 192
- Medio (Mezzo), Tommaso (*b.circa.1447*) 256
- Menahem ben Aharon Volterra 33–4
- Michelangelo xv, 69, 125, 161, 171–4, 203, 216, 221, 227, 245
- Michelotto, Don (Michelle Corella) 164, 171, 186, 188
- Michelozzo di Bartolomeo 87

- Milan, Duke of (Galeazzo Maria Sforza) 92
 Mill, John Stuart (1806–73) xxii
 Milton, John (1608–74) 65
 Minerbetti, Bernardo 106
 Minerbetti, Piero 270
 Minorite Friars 268–70
 Mirandola, Giovanni Pico della 49
 Moncada, Ugo da, Don 287
 Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de 236
 Montefeltro, Federico da, Duke (1422–82)
 32–3, 34, 35, 41, 128–9
 Montefeltro, Guidobaldo da (1472–1508) 34,
 35–6, 129, 143
 More, Thomas 203, 265
 Morgan, J.P. 249
 Moses 265
 Mussolini, Benito (1883–1945) xx, 68, 261
- Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) xx, 68,
 139, 261, 298
 nationalism 110, 262
 naturalism 21–2, 58, 244
 Navarra, Pietro, Count of Alvito 286
 Nebuchadnezzar 107
 Nelli, Giovanni (di Stefano) 46
 Nerli, Filippo de' (1485–1556) 278
 Nero (37–68) xv
 Nero, Francesco del 267
 Nero, Piero del 123
 Nicolas V, Pope (Tommaso Parentucelli,
 1397–1455) 6
- O'Neill, Eugene (1888–1953) 279
 Orange, Prince of (Philibert de Chalon) xiv
 Orsini (family) 131, 135, 136, 142, 145–6,
 147, 148, 150, 151, 164, 166
 Francesco 136, 156
 Giambattista, Cardinal 136, 147
 Paolo 136, 143, 156
 Orwell, George (1903–50) 253
 Ottaviano, Count (son of Caterina Sforza)
 93, 94, 95
 Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 BCE–17 AD)
 32, 54, 61, 64, 65, 162, 232, 235, 239, 288, 298
- Paine, Thomas (1737–1809) 68, 297–8
 Palla, Battista della 263
 Palladio, Andrea (1508–80) 255
 Panciatici (family) 125, 127
 Pantheon degli Accademici Neoplatonici 249
 Paolo, Giovanni di 35
 Pavia, Marquis of 283
 Pazzi (family and Conspiracy) 32, 34, 37, 38,
 51, 57, 102, 273
 Andrea de (1371–1485) 37
 Francesco de 37, 39, 40, 41, 273
 Jacopo de 37, 41, 42
 Raniero de 38
 Renato de 42
- Perseus xvii
 Perugino (c.1450–1523) 190
 Pescara, Marquis of *see* Avalos, Ferrante
 Francesco de
- Petrarca, Francesco 26, 27, 29, 30, 62, 107,
 108, 179, 239, 297
 Petrucci, Pandolfo 136, 150, 152, 158
 Piccinino, Niccolò 162
 Piccolomini, Aneas Silvius 256
 Piccolomini, Francesco Todeschini, Pope
 Pius III 163, 164, 165, 166
 Pinter, Harold (1930–2008) 279
 Pirandello, Luigi (1867–1936) 255, 280
 Pisa (independence and war) 72, 84, 89, 92,
 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 99, 103–5, 110, 111, 112,
 113, 117, 138, 152–3, 157–9, 172, 176, 177,
 178, 180, 186, 199–204, 249
 Pitti (family) 7
 Plato (c.428–c.348 BCE) 15, 16, 28, 49, 56,
 207, 208–9, 235
 Plautus, Titus Macius (c.250–184 BCE) 256,
 277, 284
 Pliny (Gaius Plinius Secundus, 23–79) 14,
 15–16, 31
 Plutarch (c.46–c.120) 32, 185
 Pluto 254
 Poggio, Gian Francesco Bracciolini 39, 56–7,
 203, 208, 267, 270, 271, 273
 Poliziano, Angelo (Ambrogini, 1454–94) 40,
 56, 62, 70

- Pol Pot (1926–98) 68
 Polybius 185, 234, 261
 Pompey (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, 106–48 BCE) 145
 Popper, Karl xxiii
 populations (compared) xv, 44, 166
 Procopius (c.499–565) 239
 Ptolemaic System 19–21, 22, 28, 183–4, 244
 Pucci, Antonio 12
 Puglia, Francesco da 84
 Pygmalion 65
- Quintilian (Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, c.35–c.100) 58
 Quixote, Don 184
- Rabelais, François 203
 Ramazotti, Melchiorre 222
 Raphael (Raffaello Santi, 1483–1520) xv, xvii
 Reformation 214, 269
 Remolins, Francisco 85
 Respighi, Ottorino (1879–1936) 255
 Riario, Girolamo 92
 Riario, Raffaele 39
Riccia, La see Lucrezia
 Richelieu, Armond Jean Duplessis, Cardinal (1585–1642) xx
 Ridolfi, Giovanni Battista 110, 222
 Ripa, Ottaviano da 115
Risorgimento xx
 Robertet, Florimond de 213
 Robespierre, Maximilien Marie Isidore de (1758–94) xxii
 Rome xiii–xv, xvii, xix, 48, 122, 165–6, 250, 256, 271 (sack in 5th cent.), 272, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289–90
 Romolo, Andrea di 114
 Rojava (Minorite preacher) 270
 Rovere, Francesco della *see* Sixtus IV, Pope
 Rovere, Giovanni della 36
 Rovere, Giuliano della *see* Julius II, Pope
 Rubens, Peter Paul (1577–1640) xi, 295
 Rucellai, Bernardo 249
 Rucellai, Cosimo 249, 259, 260, 263
 Rucellai gardens 277
 Ruffini, Bartolomeo 142
- Sacher-Masoch, Leopold von (1836–95) 295
 Sade, Marquis de (1740–1814) 295
 Sallust, Gaius Sallustius Crispus 234, 239
 Salutati, Barbara Raffacani 277, 281, 288
 Salviati (family) 264
 Alamanno 128, 146, 178, 193
 Francesco, Archbishop of Pisa 39
 Giovanni 270
 Jacopo 42, 222
 San Gallo, Aristotile da 172
 San Gallo, Bastiano da 256, 278
 San Pietro in Vincola, Cardinal *see* Julius II, Pope
 Santa Croce, Iacopo da 156
 Sant'Andrea in Percussina 8, 45, 55, 106, 213, 230, 231–2, 233, 238, 239, 268, 270, 276, 288
 Santi di Tito (1536–1603) 87
 Sardi, Tomasso 85
 Sarto, Andrea del (1486–1531) 256
 Sasso, ser Pagolo da Ronciglione (teacher) 54–5
 Savonarola, Girolamo (b.1452) 68–79, 83–6, 88, 89, 100, 101, 102, 106, 134, 222, 225, 235, 290, 298
 Scaevola, Mucius xvii
 Scala, Bartolomeo (b.1430) 66, 89, 97
 Schiller, Friedrich (1759–1805) 152
 Scipio, Publius Cornelius (237–183 BCE) 190, 260
 Scott, Sir Walter (1771–1832) 152
 Sebastiano del Polombo (c.1485–1547) xviii
 Seneca, Lucius Annaeus (c.4 BCE–c.65) 256
 Sforza (family) 110
 Caterina (1463–1509) 89, 90, 92–6, 98, 121, 136, 137
 Francesco Maria, Duke of Milan 284
 Ludovico, Duke of Milan 94
 Shakespeare, William (1564–1616) 280, 286, 296

- Shiva 210
 Sidney, Sir Philip (1554–86) 48
 silent reading (as a fashion) 27, 28, 29, 173, 269
 Simone di Tommaso del Pollaiuolo 88
 Sixtus IV, Pope (*b.*1414) 35–7, 38, 43, 51, 54, 92, 97, 228
 slavery 8–10
 Soderini, Francesco, Archbishop (1453–1524) 127, 128, 129, 131, 134, 164, 177, 184, 214, 216
 Soderini, Giovan Battista 190, 206
 Soderini, Piero (1450–1522) 127, 130, 134–5, 141, 153, 175, 184, 194, 205, 215, 216, 217, 218, 221, 222, 223, 224, 268, 276, 298
 sonnet (as form) xi, 27–8, 29, 106, 108, 173–4, 179, 226–8, 244, 245
 St Bartholomew's Day Massacre 296
 Staccoli, Agostino 35
 Stalin, Joseph (1879–1953) xx, 261
 Statius, Publius Papinius (*c.*45–96) 190
 Stefani, Marchionne di Coppo 271
 Stefano 39
 Stinche (prison) 4, 200, 218, 225
 Strozzi, Alessandra Macinghis 10
 Strozzi, Filippo 224
 Strozzi, Lorenzo di Filippo 263
 Suetonius, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (75–160) 234, 239
 Swift, Jonathan (1667–1745) 204

 Tacitus, Publius (*c.*55–120) 185, 196, 234, 239
 Tafani, Niccolò 247
 Tarugi, Francesco 290
 Terence (Publius Terentius Afer) 57, 58, 256
 Thomas, St (1st cent.) 77
 Tibullus, Albius (*c.*54–19 BCE) 54, 239
 Tosinchi, Pierfrancesco 120
 Tyndale, William 227

 Uccello, Paolo 21, 22

 Valentino *see* Borgia (family): Cesare
 Valeriano, Pierio xviii

 Valle, Antonio della 94–5
 Valori, Niccolò (1464–1526) 176
 Vasari, Giorgio (1511–74) 225
 Vasto, Marquis of (Alfonso de Avalos d'Aquino) xiv
 Vegetius (Flavius Vegetius Renatus, 4th cent.) 185, 261
 Venafro, Antonio da 136
 Verdelot, Philippe (composer) 278
 Vergerio, Pier Paolo 256
 Verino, Michele 55
 Vernacci, Francesco 55
 Vernacci, Giovanni 238, 252
 Verrocchio, Andrea del (*c.*1435–*c.*1488) 157
 Vespasian (Titus Flavius Vespasianus, 9–79) 261
 Vespucci, Agostino 94, 114, 115, 124, 125, 163, 202
 Vespucci, Amerigo 94
 Vettori, Francesco xx, 194, 195, 197, 198, 218, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 238–9, 242, 247, 248, 275, 276, 287, 288, 289
 Vettori, Paolo 229, 248
 Villani, Giovanni 271
 Villon, François 118–19, 245
 Vinci, Piero da 177
 Virgil (Publius Virgilius Maro, 70–19 BCE) 48–9, 54, 57, 115, 235, 245, 250, 272
 Virgilio, Marcello (di Adriani Berti) 201, 213
virtù 234
 Vitelli (family) 164
 Paolo 103–5, 110, 111, 128
 Vitelozzo 103, 104, 128, 130, 136, 145, 146, 147, 150, 151, 156

 Weber, Max (1864–1920) xxii
 Williams, Tennessee (1911–83) 279

 Xenophon (*c.*435–354 BCE) 185

 Zephyr 65