

SAVONAROLA AND THE RENAISSANCE

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THE contrast between Savonarola and his times was not as vivid as had been imagined. Much of what he stood for was but the logical corollary to many of the aspirations of Renaissance men, a fact which explains in more than one way the success he enjoyed in the Florence of the Medici. Such a success in that town is even more remarkable when one realises that Savonarola was not a Florentine by birth. This must be pointed out, since the inhabitants of Florence looked down upon the other Italians as inferior beings, who behaved boorishly and spoke in absurdly ridiculous dialects. He came instead from Ferrara in north Italy. Now during the fifteenth century Ferrara was in more than one way the capital of the north Italian Renaissance. Yet Savonarola's home atmosphere was by no means that of Cossa's dazzling frescoes in the Schifanoia palace. What instead dominated it was the rigid puritanism of his grandfather, the court physician Michele Savonarola, a narrow scholar still intellectually in the middle ages. Michele saw to his grandson's upbringing, and from him the young Savonarola acquired a remarkable taste for Holy Scripture. Still the attraction of Petrarch's love lyric did not by-pass him altogether. In fact some strikingly mediocre poems written by him when still a layman, show him applying with enthusiasm the stale platitudes of Petrarchism, then generally employed in the expression of love's tribulations, to poetic laments on the evils of the world with a sprinkling of apocalyptic visions. In philosophy he took at once to an extreme Thomism. But Savonarola failed to make any original contribution to the philosophy of the schools. His was not the deadly subtlety of an Ockham or the broad universalism of a Pico, and he failed to formulate any original thesis. Even his theory about the claims of reason was certainly not new: it was in fact pure Thomism at its most typical. How can we then explain from such a background Savonarola's tremendous hold upon Medici

Florence? First of all we must realise that a Dominican tradition of an obviously puritan tinge existed in Florence throughout the Quattrocento. During the first years of the century the chief opposer of the new humanist doctrines had been a Dominican, the Blessed Giovanni Dominici, and from 1445-1459 the very see of Florence was occupied by a Dominican, the formidable St Antoninus. With him puritanism came to play some role in Florentine life, and although his primary aim was moral improvement, his powerful personality complexed not only the ethical sphere. The picture of Medici Florence conveyed to us by Ghirlandaio's frescoes and Lorenzo's *Canti* only conveys the flamboyant side of it. But beside these there were other facets not less typical if somewhat less sparkling, which show how the ground was certainly ripe for a religious revival.

There is no doubt that Savonarola made a striking impression on many of the ablest men of an age by no means intellectually backward. Philippe de Comines was definitely struck by his acumen and grasp of affairs. Pandolfo Colenuccio hailed him as a really 'divine' man. He was nothing less than a new Socrates, the 'Socrates from Ferrara', wrote the Platonist Nesi in 1496; and about the same time the Duke of Milan saw him in the unusual light of a successful deviser of an early Maginot line. Hence the issue of a commission to Leonardo da Vinci 'to investigate into the plans made by Fra Girolamo for the fortification of the Florentine territory'. It is true that Machiavelli dismissed him in the *Prince* with a curt and not wholly convincing diagnosis of the causes of his ruin. But when mentioning in the *Discorsi* the belief of the Florentines that Savonarola was speaking with God, then he revealed a definite regard for him. For he said that he was unable to judge whether this was true or not, 'since of such a man we must speak with reverence'. On the other hand Guicciardini, who perhaps understood state affairs even better than Machiavelli and had no patience with fanaticism, did not hesitate to state that neither his own age, nor that of his own parents and grandparents, had ever seen a man of religion who came near to him. Such a widespread admiration for Savonarola shows beyond doubt his impact upon the imagination of many among his ablest

contemporaries. Even his enemies once in contact with him were often dazzled by the irresistible magnetism of his personality, and overcome by a sentiment in which admiration was mingled with alarm. He could certainly sway the complex emotions of even the most sophisticated men of a sophisticated age and his strong appeal was even felt by those very individuals whose habits of thought and ways of life placed them well outside the range of religious enthusiasm.

Despite his many un-Florentine traits, Savonarola had certainly fitted within the complex framework of Florentine spiritual life. Even those allegedly 'paganising' humanists who manned Ficino's academy and crowded Politian's lecture room came over to him. But then these same humanists were also the life and soul of the religious fraternities, where the academic delight in mutual abuse was atoned for by a longing for mutual salvation. On this carefully tended garden of devotional activity, Savonarola brought the scorching impact of his onslaught. 'I am the hailstones which will smash the skulls of those who will not take cover', he roared, and the Florentines were delighted. They were so for they saw in him a new and wonderful spiritual saviour, under whose leadership even Rome might return to the right path. He was in fact to them the embodiment of that yearning for reform which was being deeply felt by so many of the nobler spirits of the age. Moral reform was to start with a fight to death against clerical worldliness. It was the old cry, the old yearning for a millennium. What Savonarola did was to bring this widely felt urge into the open. When he thundered against the prelates of his day, the corruption of the Curia, and the many evils in the long saga of ecclesiastical abuse, he was not conjuring back the middle ages. On the contrary, he was the supreme spokesman of all those simple and inarticulate souls who had been aching for a spiritual golden age. But Savonarola went even further than being the mouthpiece, the popular expression of the reforming ideals of Renaissance men. What the fastidious humanist circles of Florence were feeling so deeply and intimately, was translated by him into terms of straightforward action, voicing from the pulpit what Ficino and

his associates had not been prepared to divulge outside the rarefied academic atmosphere.

Savonarola's connection with humanism was not limited to his embodying in his programme of universal reform what was best in its speculation. It is undeniable that he felt the appeal of the nobler aspects of the Renaissance: at the same time there is no doubt that he fascinated the humanist world of late fifteenth-century Florence, that strange world with its cult for beauty and taste for mysticism, which could express itself in the esoteric extravagances of a Pico and a Ficino, or the amazing learning of a Politian. This world, which bequeathed its unparalleled vision of beauty in the verse of the *Stanze per la Giostra* and the panels of Botticelli, went over to Savonarola without struggle. Opposition to him did not come from the humanist side, although it was the side which had certainly not benefited most from the abrupt end of the Medici rule, and relied very much thought. Ultimately the only and real difference between Savonarola and the Florentine men of learning was not really so great. It was not that they envisaged different theories of life or patronised widely different habits of thought. Ultimately the only and real difference between them boiled down to this: that Savonarola was feeling in the field of human affairs a duty which they were unprepared to perform beyond the academic sphere.

How far was the humanist world of Florence affected by the Savonarola storm? To Politian a timely death spared the painful dilemma of having to choose between breaking either with his associates or with his favourite pursuits. But the other scholars either cast their lot entirely with Savonarola, or showed at any rate sympathy with his reforming drive. Pico, Crinito, Benivieni, Verini, and many others went definitely to his side. And, what is even more interesting, some of them did not fail to leave some clear marks upon his thought. Far from attempting to exorcise humanism away, Savonarola showed himself willing to accept it, subject to some moral safeguards, and although he never approved of the more engaging side of classical letters, he nevertheless declared that Homer, Cicero, and Vergil had his approbation. He even agreed with Politian, that is to say

the greatest scholar of his century, in fiercely denouncing the slavish and unimaginative imitation of the ancients. But whereas for Politian imitation was a denial of one's own personality, for Savonarola it was to be denounced as the very negation of every artistic expression. Poetry on such lines was not poetry. 'There is a mob of self-styled poets', he remarked disapprovingly, 'who do not know how to do anything except chase the Greeks and Romans, repeat their ideas, ape their techniques and metres, and even invoke their same gods: nor are they capable of employing any other vocabulary than that of the ancients.' In the century when Valla had established the implacable dictatorship of Ciceronianism, these were indeed grave words. Still they were words not expressing the moods of reactionaries, but rather reasserting the Renaissance conception of human dignity in no uncertain terms. 'We are men like them and received from God an equal facility for assigning names to those things which change daily. But these poets of ours have so enslaved themselves to the ancients, that not only do they refuse to stray beyond their usage, but they even decline to write what the ancients had not expressed.' Behind this passage of Savonarola grins already the sarcastic shadow of Erasmus's *Ciceronianus*. Yet while he could see so clearly into the deeper issues of contemporary literature, he never freed himself from the old-fashioned notion that poetry's function was mainly didactic and that its undoubted aim was the driving of men to virtue. Poetry was the inculcation of virtue without tears. Yet its haunting grace really touched him, and his harnessing of it into the service of his cause is also a proof that he was not utterly insensitive to its elusive appeal. Really he was not less sensitive to it than any of the scholars of his own Accademia Marciana: and like the greatest humanists since the age of Petrarch and Rienzi, he also yearned for the dimly distant past. His nostalgia was not, however, for the ancient glories of Greece and Rome. His lost golden age is that of primitive Christianity, 'when', he sighed, 'chalices were wooden and prelates golden, while now chalices are golden and prelates wooden'. He saw it with the romantic enthusiasm with which Petrarch dreamt of the old Rome, and it was in a mood of humanist idealism that he

recalled the early age of the Church. It is out of the question that he regarded real learning with contempt. Indeed under his priorship the convent of St Mark became a serious competitor to Ficino's Academy as the resort of the best humanist talent in Florence. Nor was Savonarola unprepared to make some real sacrifices for the cause of humane scholarship. It is true that his organisation of the study of Greek and some oriental languages in his monastery had been certainly dictated by a desire to advance sacred learning. But the acquisition of the unique Medici library at a heavy sacrifice by Savonarola's convent at a period when its finances were by no means healthy, indicates his obvious determination to save at all cost for the town what had been the bibliographical armoury of the Florentine Renaissance. It was Savonarola's action that saved this priceless collection of classical and humanist writings to us.

All things considered, it is scarcely surprising that Savonarola was able to influence so much those humanists who came into contact with him. He fascinated and was in turn fascinated by Pico, that astounding young man whose pathetic attempt to reconcile the basic harmony of all religions and philosophies, went well beyond the wildest dreams of the schoolmen. Above all Pico, and next to him Marsilio Ficino, were the two major humanist influences on Savonarola, whose mission was ultimately but a desperate effort to actuate their grandiose dreams of a millennium on Florentine soil. On the other hand, Savonarola's impact upon some of the scholars of his time was fairly devastating: the scorching fire of his asceticism quickly withered away the bloom of their originality. Their writings, so seldom exciting, became flat and platitudinous. Nesi, the Platonist who had been such a promising member of Ficino's circle, now turned to produce a series of insipid lyrics, in which he described his interior liberation in a veritable orgy of mental nudism. Furthermore, he set down in Latin the elaborate description of a complicated vision, in which Pico disguised as a Green Woodpecker was assisting him to extol the virtues of their spiritual master. Braccesi, the humanist poet, turned so fiercely upon the ancient gods of Greece as to make one really wonder whether he did not believe after all in their

existence; and after Savonarola's arrest, when his prophet was being tortured, he bewailed in the exotic phraseology of the psalms the tragic darkness that was descending upon his world. As for Ugolino Verino, with him Braccesi's wrath against the gods was instead directed against those poets who had invented them: while in a treatise clearly of the type characterised by Gibbon as 'useful to few and entertaining to none', he strove to prove with irresistible learning that moral and religious subjects could also lead to poetic excellence.

Not dissimilar results were achieved in the literature in the everyday tongue. Here too the old glory departed, as if unwilling to outlive the age of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Under Savonarola's shadow, the delicate and musical texture of the Florentine lyric as handled by Politian and Lorenzo coarsened into the *Laudi* of the Piagnoni, where the sentiment of life's fleeting uncertainty was replaced by the certainty of death and the prospect of damnation. Even the best of the Savonarolian poets, Girolamo Benivieni, was but a dwarf, towering only over smaller dwarves. His love lyrics, he now claimed, symbolised something he had obviously not meant when composing them: while in his religious poems he tried to echo Dante and Petrarch in an atmosphere of pietistic Platonism. It was, however, left to Savonarola's devotee, Fra Benedetto, writing from the horrors of an underground cell in St Mark's Convent, to achieve with his *Cedrus Libani* and other poetic celebrations of his hero some of the dreariest doggerel in Italian literature. There is no doubt that Savonarola was effective in silencing for ever what had been the finest lyric poetry of its kind in Renaissance Italy. And what did he replace it with? With a vast body of verse without one single poem worth remembering, without one single line worth quoting!

The effect of Savonarola upon Florentine art was not very dissimilar from his impact upon letters. He was not hostile to the visual arts, provided, however, that they fitted in with his programme of moral regeneration. Pictures and statues were to portray the ecstasy of religious feeling: their mission was to edify the faithful, and the edification of the faithful was certainly not the most conspicuous trait

of the Florentine painting of his day. With such an outlook it is scarcely surprising that he did not quite approve of profane subjects in art. The Venuses, the Ledas, the Lucretias, which so delighted the eye of every soul sensitive to beauty, were but variations on a theme of scarlet womanhood, bent on the perdition of weak mankind. Their proper place was the flames, those very flames which in another world would surely extend a warm welcome to those painters who did not change their ways at once. Yet behind such a humourless rigidity lay a genuine appreciation and some not uninteresting views on art and aesthetics. We may perhaps hardly conceal a smile at his attempt to force morals into so delightfully amoral a field as that of aesthetics, when he proclaimed that between two women of equal beauty, the more virtuous one was also bound to be the more attractive. But his view that every painter expressed himself struck a new note, and so did his insistence that only the best artists should be allowed to paint in churches. His distaste for bad painting was typical of his age. Instead he reverted to a crude Thomism when he declared that works of art pleased men in the proportion to which they imitated nature; and what could be more medieval than his seeing the ultimate function of painting as the issue of enlarged 'comic strips' telling stories from the Bible to the illiterate. He was enough of a Platonist to accept beauty as a reflection of the Deity. Beauty was definitely an aspect of morality, and therefore any artistic manifestation which was not also moral was worthless. It is hardly surprising that such views proved a not altogether healthy influence upon Florentine art. After his conversion Botticelli renounced quickly that magnificent symbolism of his in which the aspirations of Renaissance classicism were translated into terms of magic beauty. He became the prey of a morbid and muddled mysticism, in which the charming world of Ovid and Politian was replaced by that of the gloomy prognostications of Joachim of Flora. Under the impact of Savonarola Lorenzo di Credi's Madonnas became flatter and more insipid than ever, quickly shedding even those few sparks of vitality they ever had possessed. Only a giant could assimilate Savonarola successfully: Michelangelo achieved

this. It was left to him to arise from the solitary recesses of his homosexual genius, to give in the tremendous majesty of his 'Final Judgment' the highest expression of Savonarolism, some thirty years after the hero of his youth had gone to his last account. Michelangelo's masterpiece was at once the apotheosis and the epitaph of all that Savonarola had stood for.

NOTICE

The next issue of *BLACKFRIARS* will appear in September and will include the first of a series of articles on modern moral problems by Gerald Vann, o.p., and an article to commemorate the eighth centenary of St Bernard by Aelred Squire, o.p.

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