

# Ambiguity and the Fixing of Identity in Early Renaissance Florence

*Luca Gatti*

A citizen of Early Renaissance Florence that stepped out into the streets and entered the spaces of his civic world joined a concert of creative formal behaviors in which he was at once an actor and a spectator. His problem here was to interpret the complex web of overlapping, conflicting and simultaneous meanings he would have read in the actions and images by which the community directed him and represented itself, and find his own place and set his standing. On most occasions he would probably have elected for a state of suspension, a floating of multiple possibilities he was loath to precipitate in too stable a form: in ambiguity the citizen of Florence developed a richness of signification, and found a refuge.<sup>1</sup>

I feel that it is important to acknowledge the extent to which, in the mobile world of Early Renaissance Florence, interpreting or representing actions or intentions was essential to success and survival, and yet open to misunderstanding. Florentines were aware of this, and their preoccupation came into conflict with the fact that assertive statements were becoming increasingly important for establishing one's position, as was a correct interpretation of meanings for determining the directions of that world's transformations. When interacting in their cosmos, the citizens of Florence were not too sure as to where they stood, and in construing an identity, they felt uneasy about committing themselves to a single meaning: they were having to move in a situation where conflicting interests cohabited and were frequently difficult to disentangle. Yet, if earlier, during the fourteenth century, Florentine men could be advised to refrain from committing themselves for they had no command on how their utterances might be under-

stood,<sup>2</sup> in the early fifteenth century such an attitude was becoming increasingly obsolete as new venues presented themselves to citizens aspiring to establish a new political and cultural identity. Thus, there was an unresolved tension between the perception of the pernicious effects of ambiguity, and the need to resort to ambiguity in order not to precipitate conflict.

In this world the effort of a political leadership went mostly into representing its own political and cultural identity and into fixing this identity as both traditional, therefore universal, and unalienable. Yet, here too there was a certain advantage in ambiguity, for it allowed a greater compass in the signification of political values, and it gave way to convenient displacements of meanings and to attractive associations with mystical attitudes.<sup>3</sup>

There was nevertheless a considerable preoccupation with the pernicious effects of ambiguity, which found its way into the city's Statutes, where several of the measures taken addressed the specific problem of ambiguity in identity. Gender, for instance, was a point of social interaction for which distinction needed to be safeguarded, so women were banned from walking through the city clad in male clothing, and similarly men were told not to dress up as women.<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that in these regulations it was the public civic space that defined the area where transvestism and its ambiguities were represented as illicit: it was not, in other words, a moral consideration that led to the rulings, but a preoccupation with identity in public. This concern with projecting a supposedly unambiguous and original identity is also apparent in another regulation banning games that involved the use of masks "by which some transform themselves into something other."<sup>5</sup> The very fact that measures should have been taken to regulate and fix identities, or that indeed, and in contrast, the sumptuary laws should force citizens to conceal their true wealth and status, point to some formidable tension deriving from the experience of uncertainty. When looking upon this world of ephemeral identities and ambiguous relationships, a Florentine might well have agreed with one of the interlocutors in Alberti's *Della Famiglia*: "Everything in the world is profoundly unsure."<sup>6</sup>

The fragility of access to fixed meanings underlined an awareness of the possible richness of representations. Yet, the very exist-

tence of this array of meanings was a hazard, an impediment in the way of a sure, comforting recognition of one's position. Successful communing relied on a conspicuous body of skills: it is no coincidence that as radical cultural and social transformations were taking place there should have been a renewed interest in those means by which signification might be structured and ordered, such as Rhetoric and Perspective. Yet, again, these were instruments that would equally lend themselves to the manipulation of the mechanisms of ambiguity, or preclude the freedom of signification that ambiguity allowed where conflicting meanings might be accommodated. In this situation of floating significance, images appeared to guarantee a certain degree of permanence, they seemed to be an example of objective constancy: above all, images had the power to make things happen. I propose therefore to consider here two aspects that derive from this situation, namely the efforts made to fix in the public world a set of meanings and values that corresponded to a specific political and cultural identity, and the undermining awareness that there was a fundamental difficulty in this, coming from the uncertainty of interpretation and the attractions of ambiguity. As evidence of the first instance it has seemed to me appropriate to focus on the role played by civic images, of which I have selected one in particular; whereas for the second aspect I have chosen to consider certain understandings of such concepts as Freedom and Fatherland, here too selecting a specific instance.

### **“They Worshipped the Lion”**

In his chronicle of early fifteenth-century Florence, Bartolomeo del Corazza records how in January 1408 the city experienced an exceptionally copious and lasting fall of snow. Del Corazza also tells us that this was an occasion for widespread merriment, when the people joined in the streets and shaped in snow statues of their civic device, the Lion, also known as Marzocco.<sup>7</sup> Ephemeral and yet powerfully symbolic, these images, born of a playful and apparently spontaneous communal activity, carried a range of ideas that permeated Florentine society so deeply as to affect the

informal gatherings of its citizens. It is with some of these ideas and their fixation into what was understood as a Florentine universal identity that I am here concerned.

Another and better known chronicler, Goro Dati, reproducing what was a standard trope of civic propaganda, links the origin of the Lion to the Roman founding of the city.<sup>8</sup> In rooting its might in the myth of its origin, Florence was of course asserting its identity: as a device the Lion established a mythical and powerful identity; it told a story of civic pride and it created an expectation of success. Painted or carved, images of the Lion marked the urban space, informed by traditionally Florentine values, and alerting subject towns and neighboring people to the fact that the Lion watched over Florence. Often gilded and raised on columns, they appropriated their pagan powers by reproducing the conventional iconography of idols: in the case of the Marzocco, the etymological derivation points to more than just a formal, typologic proximity, establishing instead a functional purpose through substitution of the lost, but well remembered, statue of Mars.<sup>9</sup>

I have tried elsewhere to outline the importance of this image in establishing a mythical origin, and through the astrological combination that Mars recalled, to fix a universal identity making Florentines at once destined to intestine strife, to commerce or to military valor. All of these features were given a concrete expression in a statue that was eventually removed by the great flood of the Arno in 1333. The statue had a powerful, talismanic and totemic function. Indeed, the citizens of Florence produced images, or beheld them, and they engaged in ritual representations, with a genuine expectation that these narratives would in reality fix the order and the meanings enacted, and that they would thereby succeed in altering the world and in shaping their personal and communal destiny. In the magic of objects and in the power of images a world was fashioned where Florentines found their beliefs and ideas at once represented and worshipped.

A system of powerful and holy images constructed identity – spiritual, cultural or political – informed it with sacredness and secured its perpetuity: civic images had therefore the power to root this identity, to perform protection or to signify might; and by their ubiquitous and steady presence they encouraged onlookers

and congregations to feel a political community. It was important, in this respect, that the images produced should be recognized as distinctly Florentine, for the perception of citizens, and of outsiders alike, had to be informed, and their minds convinced: the one image that specifically took over this function was the *segno*, the civic device. When the *segno* in the public spaces of this urban world branded images, buildings, documents, etc., it directed and policed interpretation, and in attending to meanings formed and framed by a civic device the citizens would immediately recognize as established in the communal mythological tradition the origin and the authority of the ideas represented. The processions in which the *segno* headed and centered the display of a civic self, the rituals that revolved around the statue of a *segno* to signal political change, or the spontaneous manifestations of merriment that saw citizens craft images of the *segni* were all events that turned the *segno* in a sacred body that attracted a kind of worship. Here the *segno* emancipated itself, it substantiated its meanings – to some extent reorganizing them – and gave the political concepts of identity a concrete expression, indeed a body. The collective display of devotion toward this symbol assembled in a single image the communal expectations and interests, and set them beyond the particular. We shall see later that the question of sacrificing personal and private interests for a universal concept of fatherland was a constant preoccupation of public life.

If we turn again to the specific example of the Lion,<sup>10</sup> we shall see that, by shifting functionally from image to metaphor to object, it focalized the experience of political meanings, and by its power and associations aimed to fix them as an expression of power. The poet Matteo Frescobaldi, for instance, whilst lamenting the rise to power of new men early in the fourteenth century, recalled how, when worthier citizens from older families had ruled the city, both the Florentines and their device, the Lion, enjoyed the devotion of neighbors.<sup>11</sup> The image of the Lion was very strongly identified with the Republic and with its military might, so that it was unfailingly used to signify possession of a seized territory: on entering Pisa, for instance, conquered in 1406, the Florentines erased the enemy's devices scattered in the city and replaced them with Lions.<sup>12</sup> In Dati's words the devices were "extinguished," switched

off, which is exactly how these images were understood to work: they had an active power, that gave body to political meanings and watched over their preservation.<sup>13</sup> The image of the Lion was used to take over the new land that Florence claimed as its own; indeed, when a century later the people of Pisa regained independence, public rejoice involved the mocking parade of a battered statue of the Florentine Lion: it ended with its disposal in the Arno, thus truly extinguishing its powers.<sup>14</sup>

When the spectator gazed at the *segni* defining Florence's communal identity, nothing distinguished the lions of civic heraldry from those set in a religious frame. The conflation of meaning thus achieved was certainly convenient, for much of the power was given to the image of the Lion from its close associations and frequent identifications with the supernatural world. Images of the Lion really were the focus of devotional attitudes: one of the Priors most clearly made the point when he compared the Florentine Lion crowning civic edifices to the Cross of churches and bell-towers.<sup>15</sup> Along these lines, of the Lion statues guarding the Palace of the Bargello one bore an inscription that fixed an aggressive, almost territorial meaning, whilst investing its civic origin with preternatural significance: "If the Lion roars who will not fear it?" is an exact quote from the biblical Book of Amos (3, 8).<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, in Florence real lions were kept and bred. These animals, housed near the Town Hall,<sup>17</sup> were powerfully representative of kingliness and of the communal identity, and also made real the symbols and emphasized the genealogical ties with the Roman people whom the city claimed to descend from. The keeping of lions was an important feature of institutional life and central to the rituals of self-presentation: it was inscribed in the city's Statutes<sup>18</sup> and Dati described it in detail.<sup>19</sup> Several reasons made the breeding of lions attractive, despite the high costs of keeping them: they provided a small revenue (the public was charged a small fee to visit the cage)<sup>20</sup> but above all the lions were used as objects of diplomatic exchange, a symbolic gift that established Florentine identity and bound the recipients to it.

In a society that still relied on signs of omen to assess and interpret its course and survival, the lions of the Commune were a focus for procedures of divination: the birth of lion cubs in years

of plenty induced Villani and other chroniclers to draw an explicit connection between feline fertility and communal riches.<sup>21</sup>

The founding of new Florentine settlements was an index of propagation and territorial grandeur, therefore an ideal occasion to combine representations of identity and might. The case of Firenzuola is symptomatic: on the very edges of the province, in territory reclaimed from pillaging local despots, the new town had its *raison d'être* in its very name. But the significance of the founding of Firenzuola was also fixed by dedicating its church to San Firenze and by calling upon an astrologer to identify the most favorable point of astrological intersection at which to found the town: appropriately, the point chosen was when the Lion was in ascendant.<sup>22</sup> The meanings of Florentine identity were squarely grounded on Earth and also perpetually fixed in the inalienable power of the stars and of the sacred.

The most famous and the most impressive of leonine images is the Marzocco attributed to Donatello.<sup>23</sup> Apparently meant to decorate the staircase leading to the papal apartment in the convent of Santa Maria Novella, this Lion signposted the entry to an area of the city that was given over temporarily, and reluctantly, to a foreign power. The Florentines knew that the presence of an alien authority within the city walls exposed them to internal instability and threatened their independence: having allowed the Pope to enter their city, the citizens reminded him to beware of attempting to threaten its *Libertas*. The Lion, with its distinctive political meanings, policed access to public space and reconfirmed possession and authority over it, as well as symbolically representing the integrity of the Commune and its republican foundations.

The *ringhiera*, the raised platform in front of the Town Hall from which orators addressed gathered crowds, gave onto a space of heightened civic ritual: here the city's subjects gathered to be counted and to display their submission, and here was the statue of a Lion that was also a point of revolution for the representation of political change or the preparation of war. And it was during the war with the Papacy in the 1370s that an inscription was placed on the Lion impressing on the citizens love for their fatherland and the concern of freedom.<sup>24</sup>

\* \* \*

Most of the political discourse, as it was being expressed and experienced in Early Renaissance Florence, occurred within a paradigm of *Libertas*, which conferred credibility to the ideas and actions advocated. The confines of meaning for *Libertas* extended to include a variety of definitions representing it as an unalienable civic good and locating it in a region of fundamental beliefs that, across several decades, was established as a shared and unquestionable assumption. *Libertas*, and its complementary concepts of *Amor Patriae* and Charity, were very closely interwoven ideas being used by the regime to define its political identity. In the process by which this identity was represented, an association with religious or cultural values was consistently operated so that the ideas of *Libertas* should be seen to transcend party interests and the course of actions advocated by the political leadership should be endowed with an unquestionable universality. It was the interests and apprehensions of an elite that fed the notion of *Florentina Libertas*: by fixing the meanings of *Libertas* in the set of ritual objects and behaviors through which the city communed with deity, the regime reflected upon its policies the power of a non-subversible order.<sup>25</sup> It is only within this virtual sanctification of a political system that one can make sense of the consistency and degree to which anything that might represent a threat to it, most particularly tyranny, could be represented as attacking the sacred order of the world: in the course of a debate on civic unity that took place in January 1429, Lorenzo Ridolfi spelled out the main sense of the regime's desire to represent itself, and therefore the values it stood for, as a focus of devotional attention, whilst at the same time representing any other political stance as sacrilegious:

Just as a single God should be worshipped, so should all the citizens honor you. Those that do otherwise worship idols and should be damned.<sup>26</sup>

By representing freedom as a fundamental value of Florentine society, the regime was effectively representing its own centrality to the system. When a political strategy was seen to have been successful, news of it were rebounded across the city to advertise the fact. On most occasions of celebration, bells were made to toll the joy of officialdom, echoing and distributing around the city the sense of a political interpretation of events. It is a measure of



how ritual actions and the objects that propped up such events could be charged with symbolic significance that, in 1406, the bells of San Iacopo in Via Ghibellina should have been inscribed with words that brought together in a model of virtuous concerns the glorification of the deity and the defense of the fatherland.<sup>27</sup>

A successful identification of freedom with the world that the citizens inhabited and felt their own required a reification of *Libertas*. The sounds, shapes and colors of civic rituals gave *Libertas* a substantiation that framed and filled the civic world, a world that the citizens were made to recognize as their own, and the survival of which they were induced to believe depended on their endorsement of *Libertas*. Informing objects and instruments of worship with civic imagery caused the devout citizens to coalesce in formal manifestations of love of the fatherland, and to refrain from actions that, guided by sectarian or private interests, would bring about the "*civica pestis intestini dissidi*," the evil of division and conflict.

As was seen earlier, it was during the war with the Papacy that some of the more important themes of the republican mythology were developed. The awkward position of taking up arms against the spiritual leader of Christianity required a concerted effort in establishing freedom as a paramount value. It was now that a fusion of sacred power and civic concerns was most urgently called for. Should it be realized, the political myth would be fixed in an order of sacred values thought to be inalienable. An association of this kind was a precious asset for a regime calling for unity and sacrifice.

To substantiate the meanings of *Libertas* in an image that could thus inform rituals and public spaces, a new device was created in the late fourteenth century that consisted in a red cross over a white shield with the word *Libertas* inscribed. During the same period a tournament was organized to honor "*Madonna Libertà*," a public event that rallied the city to behold the values of freedom as central to its destiny.

That the purpose of such actions was that of fixing in the minds of the citizens and in the fabric of society a set of values traditionally and unquestionably Florentine has no better confirmation than in the city Statutes of 1415. Regulating the annual public festivities on the day of St. Anne (when the city had expelled a foreign ruler), it is said that the joust and the celebrations were arranged

in eternal memory of the freedom of the city of Florence and so that it should be fixed (*infixum*) in the minds of the citizens how on this day the people of Florence with the help of God and of their virtue were freed from tyranny.<sup>28</sup>

On a more private level, the city's spiritual leaders were providing the all-important reassurance that the course of actions taken by the political leadership when resulting in a confrontation with the Roman Church was appropriate and spiritually sound, and in so doing they were effectively indicating the degree of importance that individuals should attach to the freedom of their fatherland.<sup>29</sup> This kind of indoctrination was so successful that in later years one of Florence's most representative politicians, Gino Capponi, could actually advise that at the head of the Republic should be men who held their fatherland dearer than their own interest or their soul.<sup>30</sup>

It was most particularly during periods of crisis that *Patria* and *Libertas* as complementary ideas were subsumed in a single effort to defend the city's independence. In times of imminent peril for the Republic, the regime could call upon the citizens' devotion to their fatherland to rally in a display of unity. In the early 1430s Palla Strozzi could point to this as a fundamental feature in the experience of a city which otherwise was inclined to break up in pursuit of factional interests.<sup>31</sup> The success in making *Libertas* into a cult object that sustained the scaffolding of Florentine society had the effect of locking the political debate into a single direction, for even the early Medici conceived of their political control as occurring within the paradigm of *Libertas* and of its institutional configuration.

The question of civic strife dogged the political debate and was ultimately never resolved. In those attempts that were made to establish unity was a conspicuous use of *Libertas* as a good common to all and of such vital importance that its care transcended party or individual interests. The ultimate measure of one's dedication to the common good, to the fatherland, to freedom, was the will to dispense with one's personal interest and one's life. By establishing this set of values, the regime could ensure the dedication of citizens to overcoming their occasional differences, however deeply rooted, and rally to support of the Commune, at least in times of crisis.

The order of beliefs that would induce individual citizens to a political martyrdom had to be of a kind that transcended the particular, and one of the purposes, if not the main one, of representing *Libertas* was to engrain civic conscience so deeply that it would come to be accepted as good reason for a citizen to lay down his life for the *Patria*. True enough, dying for the fatherland, or, more appropriately in the case of the Florentine merchant, at least sacrificing one's personal interest to support the common good, was the outcome of a particular political course which the ruling political elite, the *Reggimento*, had elected to pursue. By associating *Libertas* with those images that gave the fatherland its distinct identity the regime was successfully promoting its ideas as fundamental to the city's survival. Yet, much of the success depended on the degree of fixity, and we shall now turn to see in detail how this preoccupation worked in a specific instance, and the kind of tensions that it brought into relief.

### **Stefano Porcari on Freedom and Fatherland**

In being told that their fatherland and a particular understanding of freedom were the same thing, the people of Florence were urged to empathize with a policy that demanded of them sacrifice and consensus participation in the running of the country. In this process of indoctrination, the Christian virtue of Charity was given a distinct civic connotation by which the fatherland was construed as a mystical body that would attract unquestioning devotional attitudes. I now want to focus on a concrete instance in which this process can be caught in action, and in which it is also possible to see coming to the surface a sense of transience of meaning and a consequent desire to fix meaning that defies the seemingly logical terms by which the argument was being presented and required a devotional and unquestioning attitude toward that which *Libertas* meant. The particular experience in question is that of a speech delivered in public and from the *ringhiera* by a newly appointed Magistrate, Stefano Porcari. Porcari himself was a Roman, but the set of speeches that have been preserved in many copies in the libraries of Florence are clearly

the representation of very topical issues that were relevant to the highly strung political situation of Florence in the late 1420s.<sup>32</sup>

I have chosen to concentrate on only one of Porcari's delivered speeches because it is little known and yet an extremely important source, and because it stands out as an impressive account of the pressure that was brought to bear on citizens to identify in the fatherland the *Patria*, a compound of institutions, traditions, and moral values, a good to be shared, treasured and upheld beyond personal interest. Here the *Patria* was represented as the social "body" to be kept free, and hence, by implication, the purpose for waging war and forsaking one's life and economic security.

In his previous speech delivered in the Cathedral during his swearing-in ceremony on 31 August 1427, Porcari had focused on the themes of civic unity and justice, and somewhat conventionally had identified the foundations of a healthy society in a united population and in a fair system of justice. In the preamble to his second speech, Porcari flattered his audience by telling them how, on that earlier occasion, he had been touched by the ardour of Charity that he had noticed burning in them, "written" in their ears and "painted" on their foreheads<sup>33</sup>: it was freedom, the *fiorentissima libertà*, that the orator singled out as the object of their charitable attention. It is worth reflecting on Porcari's analogy as he set out to expound his new subjects, namely freedom and fatherland. Cast in a hyperbolic preamble that aimed to set up an ideal audience, the analogy reveals an evident unease about the event that young knight was at the centre of. Speaking out to the crowd, he seemed engaged in fixing in their minds the ideas he was expounding to them, a fixing that he did not trust his words alone to accomplish. Porcari knew that he had little command over an appropriate interpretation of his intended meanings, for it was after all up to his unrestful audience to accept or reject them. The "truth" that Porcari was representing to an assembled citizenry demanded a degree of fixity in order to work beyond the narrow if symbolically significant bounds of that particular event; and underscoring Porcari's earnest appeals lay a lack of faith in the lasting power of the logic of his argumentation. Hence the rhetorical ploy of setting up a yielding audience that would let itself be inscribed: the ears of this charitable Florentine congregation did not hear, it seems, but

were written on, and their minds did not question, but were painted on. In a turn of phrase which he might have thought evidenced his florid oratory, Porcari revealed a fundamental concern with the instability of meaning.

\* \* \*

In establishing his subject matter, Porcari resorted to a well-known *topos* by juxtaposing the effects of appropriate public behavior with those driven by self-interest. Porcari portrayed an image of the Republic in which citizens had allowed themselves to be run by private matters. These citizens, Porcari claimed, let *havoc* loose in their city and their ambitions fostered strife and ruin.<sup>34</sup>

It was in adopting the complex set of formal behaviors called for in interacting with one's neighbors, and in locating them in a familial network, that the people of Florence established an identity of sorts. Porcari was therefore keen to represent relatives, friends and the fatherland as the foundations of the public man, the points at which a natural human condition became a social responsibility and a citizen was furnished with a recognizable identity: herein lay the citizens' "origin," here was the source of their civic selves. The *parenti* and the *amici* were aspects of Florentine social life of paramount importance to structuring interpersonal relationships and establishing a citizen's status and position in the public world. Porcari's association of a comprehensive idea of *Patria* with these social experiences was one instance in a constant and articulated effort to furnish sections of the population with a political identity that would be defined in terms of that being assumed by the Commune.<sup>35</sup>

Porcari's main concern was to establish a category of the "natural" citizen, one that would be automatically assumed based on a manifest allegiance to the *Patria*, in the same way that one felt bound to an honorable behavior in relations with relatives and friends. By defining these attitudes to the fatherland as "natural," they were being located outside a citizen's reasonable questioning. In the event that his natural impulse should fail, the citizen's obligation would nevertheless be reconfirmed by ethical and divine laws:

All the laws of nature, all divine and human laws appropriately force us to fulfill this obligation.

Having established the natural bonds that impel men to forsake their own interest to support the public good, Porcari moved on to represent the fatherland as a superior body that called for such attention. It was a most impressive and ringing piece of oratory in which the concept of *Patria* that emerged was one that transcended the particular and constructed such wide ranging implications as to make irreverent any resistance to self-sacrifice. Gradually the *Patria* was turned into a mystical, fecund, propulsatory body that was the source of life, riches, security and happiness:

From where do our first natural birthrights come? From the fatherland. From where do the joys of childbirth come? From the fatherland. From where do the honest and pleasant duties of parents come? From the fatherland. From where do the affectionate attentions and the generosity of friends come? From the fatherland. Is it not the fatherland that provides public dignity? Is it not the fatherland that confers upon us the most magnificent honors? Is it not the fatherland that preserves our human felicity? Where do we live, where do we prosper, if not in the fatherland? Where do we possess our domestic riches, if not in the fatherland? Where do we find all of our pleasures and amusements? Our gaiety? And finally our public and private riches, if not in the fatherland? Who defends us? Who rescues us? Who counsels us? Who watches over us in all our needs and on all occasions, if not the fatherland?<sup>36</sup>

Despite this display of rhetorical effect in which the repeated questions confirmed the obligation of citizens to feel devoted to their fatherland, Porcari found it necessary to urge once again his listeners to have this common good fixed in their minds:

Its gentle revered name must live forever in our hearts, we must always keep our thoughts focused on the health and the security of the community, always think of the common good, of tranquility, of peace and of public rest.<sup>37</sup>

The implication that listening citizens had a discretionary power, and that they might after all not accept this as an incontrovertible “natural” sentiment, undermined the logic of Porcari’s argument. He now had to re-enforce the citizens’ commitment to their fatherland by going through a catalogue of obligations of which the appeal is emotional, but effective.<sup>38</sup>

Forceful repetition rather than logical argumentation is what Porcari resorted to, calling on vague categories of obligation such as honesty and honor to represent the ideal citizen as willing to give up his life for the fatherland:

The soul of every honest citizen worthy of praise must prefer the good of the fatherland to his ease and advantages, and for the health of the fatherland, he must be prepared to affront all the plagues, all the fatigues and all the dangers, calamity and death.<sup>39</sup>

Porcari was evidently structuring in his speech a concept of *Patria* that transcended the particular, that made irrelevant the individual interest in which resistance to a set of political ideas was located. The myth of *Patria*, which was here also embedded in a set of authoritative references to its classical manifestations, was, as has been seen above, one that had already been elaborated into a mystical idea, one inextricably bound to the Christian virtue of Charity. And it was Charity that Porcari relied on to move the good citizen to give up his personal interest and sacrifice his life and belongings to that superior good which was his *Patria*:

Let then the flame and the love of the common good shine in your magnificent and generous breast, let the concern of this very thriving city take precedence over your other private interests.<sup>40</sup>

Upon closing his speech Porcari summarized his principal argument, that as long as the citizens upheld their fatherland more than their personal interests they would not forsake their freedom. In so doing he was appealing to them to have this impressed in their minds.<sup>41</sup>

Alongside the mystique of the fatherland that represented it as a holy body to which citizens should direct their devotional attention, Porcari used a second order of authority to confirm the truth of his statements, the *exemplum* from the Classical world. He nurtured his audience with a lengthy list of worthy men who in ancient times had fought for the *Patria*, heroes whose sacrifice the gods rewarded with immortal fame. In unfolding this canon before his audience Porcari was hoping to affect a citizenry which, especially at its periphery, had little enthusiasm for war, not least because, rather than their lives, it was their pockets that were being called into question. In an effort to bribe the skeptic listeners into accepting a measure of personal sacrifice, Porcari illustrated to them the rewards of a virtuous attitude to the fatherland: the inflation of honors and the magnificence that would result from heroic deeds would bring to them the devotion of all the people.

The much celebrated *virtù* of the new Renaissance man represented a manner of bearing and conduct that, in Florence at least, had profound social implications. Its specifically male connotations excluded at least one half of the population from identifying with the prospected model of ideal behavior, whilst its resorting to cultural associations derived from a Stoic tradition imposed it as a model for those with a degree of learnedness. Here was represented an exclusively male order of political and cultural values, and there were profound political implications in constructing a particular model of manliness, for it defined the new obligations of those citizens called upon to support a particular political condition, and regulated interaction amongst them by sorting decorous behaviors from indecorous ones in times of crisis. As men roused each other in the debating councils to *viriliter* brave menaces, their attitudes were molded on the *exempla* of ancient Rome. Similarly, Porcari's catalogue of manly behaviors derived from the Classical world framed appropriate attitudes to the fatherland. The weapon and armor laden consort of male saints suddenly peopling the Florentine civic space and informing it with the gravity of mature, age-worn, or heroic virility promoted a set of attitudes in a section of the male population and coincidentally established its centrality in the cosmos it was purportedly building and defending.<sup>42</sup>

\* \* \*

Identity, whether perceived or projected, was a most significant aspect of social life. Whether individual or communal, to represent one's identity or interpret that of others was a means to shaping a cosmos and establishing one's position with respect to it. So complex, overlapping, and at times conflicting were the meanings generated by the response of a political class undergoing the experiences of Florentine society that it is best to think of civic identity as being shaped as requiring constant confirmation and adaptation. In the civic world of Florentine behaviors, written or spoken words, the building of structures, the coloring or shaping of objects, praying, joining processions, buying or selling, indeed all actions, were meaningful statements. To those who had to understand what was meant by a sequence of actions, a correct inter-



pretation rested on a set of assumptions about the identity of the agent, the context of the event and the conventions shared. A sure recognition of all these elements was essential, and yet it was also worryingly elusive: Florentines were uncertain about meaning. The point was made at the outset of this paper, and it transpired across the several preoccupations with the fixation of meaning here reviewed: yet, the hazards of communication and the fragility of interpretation should not be overstated to the point of imagining the Florentine citizen as transfixed and frozen by the pluralities and complexities of communing. Given the degree to which Florentines engaged with their surrounding world, this is manifestly not the case, and the task of acting and communing in the public world was consistently and, in most instances, successfully performed. That this should have been so testifies to the array of skills that Florentines developed for understanding their world and capturing its volatility.

## Notes

1. On the related issues of identity and ambiguity in Florence, see M. Becker, "An essay on the quest for identity in the early Italian Renaissance," in J. S. Rowe and W. H. Stockdale (eds.), *Florilegium Historiale: Essays in honour of Wallace K. Ferguson*, Toronto, 1971, pp. 294-312; and R.F.E. Weissman, "The Importance of Being Ambiguous: Social Relations, Individualism, and Identity in Renaissance Florence," in S. Zimmerman and R.F.E. Weissman (eds.), *Urban Life in the Renaissance*, London, 1989, pp. 269-280. On ambiguity in general see W. Empson, *Seven Types of ambiguity*, London, 1984 [1930].
2. Paolo da Certaldo advised that, because of the lack of command on the meaning of words, one should reflect on the consequences of what is said: "The word once spoken is like a thrown pebble: so before uttering it always think, and think again on what you are about to say and what might follow from it," in S. Morpurgo (ed.), *Il Libro di buoni costumi di Paolo di Messer Pace da Certaldo*, Florence, 1921, p. 66.
3. On these preoccupations in early sixteenth century Florence, see L. Gatti, "Displacing Images and Devotion in Renaissance Florence: the Return of the Medici and an Order of 1513 for the Davit and the Iudit," *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, 1994, 2, pp. 3-35.
4. *Statuta Populi et Communis Florentiae*, 3 vols., Fribourg, 1783, vol. II, p. 271.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 420.
6. For Alberti's quote, *Della Famiglia*, see Weissman, (note 1 above), p. 272.

7. *Diario Fiorentino di Bartolomeo di Michele del Corazza, anni 1405-1438*, G. Corazzini (ed.), [Archivio Storico Italiano], s. 5, t. XIV, 1894, pp. 233-298, here p. 246.
8. G. Dati, *L'istoria di Firenze dal 1380 al 1405*, L. Pratesi (ed.), Norcia, 1904, p. 134. The earliest reference to the Lion known to me is in a song of 1243, see A. D'Ancona, "La politica nella poesia del secolo XIII e XIV," *Nuova Antologia*, IV, 1867, pp. 10-52, here p. 13.
9. I have studied the memory and the mythological function of this image in "Il 'fiero Marte' a Firenze e il mito della 'pietra scema': riti, memorie e ascendenze," *Rinascimento*, 1995, pp. 154-185.
10. Among the Florentine *segni* the Lion remains unstudied in modern historiography. I propose to return to it in greater depth elsewhere; in the meantime, see F.L. Del Migliore, *Firenze città nobilissima illustrata*, Florence, 1684, pp. 242-248. On the other Florentine *segni* see Dati, (note 8 above), pp. 133-135; L.D. Ettlinger, "Hercules Florentinus," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XVI, 1972, pp. 119-42; and for the Lily, M. Bergstein, "Marian Politics in Quattrocento Florence: the Renewed Dedication of Santa Maria del Fiore in 1412," *Renaissance Quarterly*, XLIV, 4, 1991, pp. 673-719.
11. *Miscellanea di Cose Inedite o Rare*, F. Corazzini (ed.), Florence, 1835, p. 233.
12. Dati, (note 8 above), p. 133.
13. On the power of images to establish identity and affect perception, see R. Trexler, "Follow the Flag. The Ciompi Revolt Seen from the Streets," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, XLVI, 1984, pp. 357-392; and S.Y. Edgerton, *Pictures and Punishment: Art and Criminal Prosecution During the Florentine Renaissance*, New York, 1958.
14. Luca Landucci, *Diario Fiorentino*, Florence, 1985, p. 78.
15. M. Rastrelli, *Illustrazione istorica del Palazzo della Signoria detto inoggi il Palazzo Vecchio*, Florence, 1792, p. 43.
16. L. Passerini, "Del Pretorio di Firenze," in *Curiosità di Storia e Arte Fiorentina*, Florence, 1866, pp. 3-40, especially pp. 25-26.
17. Regarding the location and the management of the lion cage see Del Migliore, (note 10 above), pp. 242-248 and R. Davidsohn, *Firenze ai tempi di Dante*, Florence, 1929, pp. 476-477.
18. The 1325 Statutes stipulated that the food for the lions should be paid by the Camera del Comune and that the officials responsible for the lions should be elected by the Priori: *Statuti della Repubblica Fiorentina. Statuto del Podestà dell'anno 1325*, R. Caggese (ed.), Florence, 1921, p. 336.
19. Dati, (note 8 above), p. 116.
20. L. Zdekawer, "Appunti e Notizie," *Miscellanea Fiorentina di Erudizione e Storia*, I, 1886, pp. 157-159. The lion cage was evidently one of the main attractions in Florence for Charles VIII asked to visit it in 1494: Landucci, (note 14 above), p. 81.
21. G. Villani, *Cronica*, F. Gherardi Dragomanni (ed.), Florence, 1845, X, 183 and XI, 67.
22. *Ibid.*, X, 199.
23. On Donatello's Marzocco see H.W. Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello*, Princeton, 1963, pp. 41-43.
24. Franco Sacchetti, *Il Libro delle rime*, A. Chiari (ed.), Bari, 1936, p. 190. Evidence that the Lion was the center of celebrations signifying political change or success comes also from a song written on the eve of Cosimo de Medici's return

- from exile, see F.R. Flamini, *La lirica Toscana del Rinascimento anteriore ai tempi del Magnifico*, Pisa, 1891, p. 97.
25. See L. Gatti, "The 'comune studio libertatis' of Florence and Venice, and the Political Implications of the Pre-Medicean Restoration of the Convent of San Marco," *QUASAR*, 13-14, 1995, pp. 37-48.
  26. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Consulte e Pratiche*, 48, f. 51r.
  27. G. Richa, *Notizie Istoriche delle Chiese Fiorentine, divise ne' suoi Quartieri*, 10 vols., Florence, 1754-1762, vol. 2, p. 213.
  28. This part of the Statutes is quoted in U. Dorini, "Il culto delle memorie Patrie nella Repubblica di Firenze," *Rassegna Nazionale*, CLXXIX, 1911, pp. 3-25, p. 51.
  29. M. Becker, "Church and State in Florence at the Eve of the Renaissance. 1343-1382," *Speculum*, XXXVII, 1962, pp. 509-27.
  30. G. Tognetti, "Amare la patria più che l'anima. Contributo circa la genesi di un atteggiamento religioso," in *Studi sul medioevo cristiano offerti a Raffaello Morghen*, II, Rome, 1974, pp. 1011-26, p. 1011.
  31. G. Cavalcanti, *Istorie Fiorentine*, G. di Pino (ed.), Milan, 1944, p. 301.
  32. For Porcari's speeches see *Prose del Giovane Buonaccorso da Montemagno inedite alcune*, Giuliani (ed.), in *Scelta di Curiosità Letterarie*, 141, Bologna, 1874, where they are erroneously attributed to Buonaccorso da Montemagno.
  33. Porcari, *Ibid.*, p. 14.
  34. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.
  35. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
  36. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
  37. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
  38. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
  39. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
  40. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
  41. *Ibid.*
  42. On the development of a male-heroic ideology see R. Starn, "Reinventing heroes in Renaissance Italy," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVII, 1986, pp. 67-84.