

The Virgin of Siena

It's a commonplace among Tuscophiles that the cities of the great Province are quite clearly gendered. Edward Hutton always wrote of Siena as feminine:

It is true that in Florence you will find a clear intellectual beauty, virile and full of light...but in Siena...you have everything that the heart can desire: a situation lofty and noble, an aspect splendid and yet ethereal, a history brave, impetuous, and unfortunate, a people still living yet still unspoiled by strangers. Yes, Siena set so firmly on her triune hill, towers there even today with a gesture of joy, radiant and beautiful, caught about by her vineyards as with a kirtle of green, girdled with silver and gold - the silver of her olives mixed with the gold of her corn.

I've always felt the justice of this very loving analysis. Siena is a young girl, a child with her children's games apotheosised in the Palio, all the year's yearning spent on the winning of a bright flag; she is an ancient princess with her frescoed palaces and tall towers. She is a disinherited queen, with her unbuilt Cathedral, the ruin of what never came to be. She harbours within her grim cliffs of mediaeval power, but never so far from the humanising light of loyalty and affection; Siena's piazzas are ready to spring to life with fondness and joy.

In all of this Siena gathers to herself something much older than any city, the genius of the land in which she is built. Tuscany, and this central-southern part of it especially, has about it a special quality that belongs to a few favoured tracts of Europe: the sense that it is an ancient land, rich in stone, immemorial in cultivation, a place where human community life has profoundly marked the forms of the earth. That the signs of human settlement have remained so overwhelmingly positive is due to the enduring genius of Tuscans in befriending their land, in responding generously to its quality, in making friends with it.

The roseate colour of Sienese brick, trimmed with bright waves of white stone, responds to sunshine with a kind of hilarity. Italians often speak of a countryside as *ridente*, laughing: and there is laughter hidden in the streets of Siena too. They can be extraordinarily dusky here and there: yet the stealing presence of reflections of light, of a small flower, or an opening door and the peeling of affectionate welcome always seems ready to banish the dark.

The fields around Siena are also images of an industry closely married to the rhythms of the earth. Chianti Classico begins at the north gate of Siena, and to the south stretch the flat granaries and pastures beaten out of the desert land, the *Crete Senesi*. This is the source of the busy and decent marketing that still qualifies the streets just behind the fashionable boutiques of the Banchi di Sopra: Tuscan bread like *roches moutonée*, saltless and rapidly hardening: magnificent pipkins of succulent oil, peerless fruits in season, the cheeses of the southern Sanese and the ranked bottles of the princely wine whose austere authority gives the country its name. So much hard work, well and generously done, welcomed and willingly paid-for by people who trust one another: these set the tonality of a Tuscan city.

If you want to find the epicentre of this ordered world, it is exactly where you would expect it to be. The City tower which rises over the Palazzo Pubblico is a mighty shaft of brick, but it flowers white in an unmistakable stone lily. Siena solemnly dedicated herself to the Virgin in a moment of high drama before the battle with Florence at Monteperti (1260). This consecration found its symbol in the great painted altarpiece, the *Maestà* of Duccio di Buoninsegna, which the population carried bodily to the Cathedral in 1311; and today we can still climb to the quiet shrine in the Cathedral museum where it stands today. When it was

enthroned on the high altar by that joyous and wondering crowd, the altar stood beneath the Dome, and they could have walked about the masterpiece, endlessly exploring its jewel-like windows onto the story of salvation. The Maestà is now outside the Cathedral, secluded in a calm room carved out of the aisle of the unbuilt new Cathedral; there is a rightness in the seclusion, because the Madonna is sacred, the heart of the city, and should be found by those willing to make a small pilgrimage, to leave behind the traffic of everyday. The Cathedral has set the picture well, and in the dim light and calm one can come close and encounter its extraordinary power.

The Madonna's head, circled by her veil, is gently inclined, which gives her pensive face an air of deep meditation. Her eyes still meet ours with a profound, stilled intelligence. It is a face of serious awareness, but of no tension. Her stillness is emphasised in the pyramidal weight of her dark blue robe, trickling from slender shoulders to spill over the steps of the heavy throne on which she rests. Beneath it can be glimpsed the blood-red and gilded tunic; traditionally these paired colours express the heavenly vocation to motherhood, and the state of virginity. She embodies therefore the power of the Incarnation. Yet all insight and mystery seems vested in her, rather than in any quality of the Child she holds in her arms. He is undifferentiated himself by any sign of supernal wisdom: gratefully we find him to be just a baby. There is an ulterior reason why we should recognise ourselves in this Child: In Siene tradition Mary's special bond with her city was expressed in the tender image of the *Madonna Lactans*: Mary treats Siena as a nursling, an especially beloved child. Surely this expresses a delighted humility that relates to all the other manifestations of Siene speciality.

In a political entity as complex as an Italian city there will be the influence of the secular realities that politics demands. But the childlike element in the Siene character, consecrated in the religious self-understanding embodied at all points in the culture and bodily forms of the city, guarantees a kind of depth which annuls the divisions of politics. Monteaperti was a single golden victory, but it was ascribed to the power of the holy Virgin. In the end Florence would avenge that defeat, and the grand-dukes would lift their sceptre over Siena without greatly taxing the limits of their earthly power. But none of this intervenes in the stilled atmosphere we enjoy as we rest under the gaze of Duccio's wonderful Madonna. She knows the weary vanity of earthly victories, and she also knows the path the of life that lies through the Cross. The thoughtless child who sits so comfortably in her lap is Jesus, but is Siena too.

The troop of cloned angels that is drawn up around their throne is entirely subordinated to the woman enthroned. These univocal spiritual beings are unengaged in the field of power between the Mother and her Son. But drawn up before them is a brightly-robed gathering of saints, our sisters and brothers in camel-skin, silk vestments, and secular dress: grizzled beards of apostles, formal profiles of prelates, devoted veiled faces of virgins. Their eyes are focussed on the figure of the Mother of God, because their meaning is hidden in the meditation that possesses her. This is the heart of Tuscany, the still centre of an obedient covenant with nature and history. Its longing and trust shines in the words Duccio gilded to the step of the throne: *Holy Mother of God, be the cause of rest (requiei) to Siena, and to Duccio life, because he painted you thus*. The choice of the word *requiem* is of significance; it is the rest enjoyed by the blessed departed, the eternal gift of the redemption. Christianity offers the enjoyment of eternal gifts in the present; and the perception of this eternal dimension is the very heart of Italian wisdom in the miraculous years of Renaissance humanism. The treasuring of the human form, the human mind, the irreplaceable character of each human soul, is a fountain of joy which makes the world one in faith, hope, and love. That unity of vision is the element which gilds the Tuscan experience in all its variety. So the presence in the spectrum of the poet and the martyr, the athlete and the leper, the pauper and the prince has a deeply theological ground.

The great minds of Florence mediate these realities in their greatness: Florence is the metropolis, and in the works of Bracciolini, Agnolo Poliziano, Pico della Mirandola and the

rest we can find Christian humanism in its loftiest and most spelled-out forms. The art which flourished in and flowed from the City is rightly celebrated as furnishing Europe with its cultural pinnacle.

Siena by comparison is provincial, and one can never forget that the fork in the road that divided the two