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Brendan Dooley: Morandi's Last Prophecy and the End of Renaissance Politics

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INTRODUCTION

OF MEDIUM HEIGHT, perhaps fifty-five years old. Nut-brown beard, with flecks of white. Dressed in a simple monk's robe with a black hood over the head." The corpse that lay across a straw mat in a small cell of the Tor di Nona prison in Rome was nothing special. Nor was the manner of death, if we are to trust in the candor of the physician writing the death certificate. "I do not suspect nor do I see signs of poisoning," he protested, perhaps too emphatically.¹ No, he continued, Orazio Morandi died of a simple malignant fever of unknown origin, which began twelve days before. Fra Michelangelo Soderini confirmed the doctor's opinion. "I know he died a natural death," he specifies, "because I always assisted him while he was in solitary confinement and during the whole time of his illness, of which he died at around twelve hours of the clock today"—November 7, 1630.

The Roman rumor mill was not quite so prudent. "It is believed without a doubt that [Morandi] was killed by poison administered through his food," Giacinto Gigli, a historian, wrote in his diary.² At least among those who paid attention to city gossip, Orazio Morandi, the abbot of Santa Prassede, one-time general of the Vallombrosa Order, was a victim of foul play. A quick dispatch of the suspect had obviously been ordered to protect the honor of the high officials in Rome, more and more of whose names had begun to come up during the trial proceedings because of their connections with what went on at the monastery. It was not the first time a judicious cover-up had taken the form of a murder. Nor, in the violent world of seventeenth-century Italian politics, would it be the last.

For Morandi's fellow Romans, once the initial suspicions about papal mischief hardened into convictions, the moral of the story had to do with the ignominious end of one who had risen so high. And indeed, only four months before, Morandi was the most honored astrologer in town. Galileo Galilei and members of the Roman aristocracy attended his elegant soirées. Among the visitors to his library were the greatest cultural figures in Rome, from Gian Lorenzo Bernini to Cassiano Dal Pozzo, and the highest prelates in the ecclesiastical hierarchy—including the cardinals sitting on the Congregation of the Index of Forbidden Books. To many of these Morandi offered advice on astrology and other aspects of the occult, which they gratefully acknowledged in the form of protection and favors. And his renown reached outside of Rome to wherever his vast

2 INTRODUCTION

correspondence carried his counsels and opinions to legions of admirers. If anyone in Rome was safe from the vicissitudes of fortune, it should have been Morandi.

Then in May 1630, Morandi delivered what he evidently intended to be his masterstroke, the gesture that would win him a place in modern history: a prediction about Pope Urban VIII's imminent death due to the nefarious influence of a solar eclipse on the pope's horoscope. But the effect was far different from Morandi's intention. In the rumor-saturated world of early modern Europe, the prediction rapidly slid out of its author's control. It was quickly taken up by the writers of the clandestine manuscript newsletters, who peddled their malicious gossip throughout the Roman streets and squares. News of it reached as far as Spain, urging the Spanish cardinals to rush to Rome to be on hand for what they and everyone else believed would be the next conclave. In France, it excited the curiosity of none other than Cardinal Richelieu. All for nothing. The prescribed date passed; the pope lived on. No conclave was held, and speculation about Urban's successor, at least for now, ground to a halt.

Urban VIII's reaction was predictable. Political astrology has always been risky, even in ages when astrology was a dominant intellectual category. The Roman emperors in antiquity forbade predictions about themselves. In Morandi's time, so did most rulers. The popes, concerned as much with their own vulnerability as with the theological implications, condemned all sorts of judicial astrology without exception. So Urban was fully within the law when he personally ordered Morandi to be brought into custody. When evidence of other activities at the monastery came to light, these were merely added to a list that was to include astrology along with the circulation of prohibited books and political chicanery among the heinous crimes for which the pope ordered the governor of Rome to seek a condemnation.

The consequences of the case were enormous. Astrology itself was hurt by the growing impression that predictions were mere merchandise in the game of political and social favors. Soon after the trial, Urban VIII came out with some of the severest anti-astrology legislation ever written. And this legislation, as well as Morandi's crimes, deeply affected the outcome of the Galileo affair, which began the following year. For this alone, Morandi deserves more than an antiquary's footnote in the annals of scientific curiosities. But his real importance lies elsewhere.

For contemporaries, the death and the definitive official explanation effectively put an end to the story, at least so far as it regarded Morandi himself. For us, the story has just begun. Why would a man of Morandi's intelligence put at risk the distinguished position he had striven for a lifetime to attain? What in the Roman environment convinced him he could get away with it? And how, in the end, could he have been so tragically

deceived? The mystery of Morandi concerns the basic compulsions of advancement in a status-drenched society, and the very nature of knowledge at the origins of science.

Part of the answer lies buried in the documents before us. We are in the State Archives in Rome, along bustling Corso del Rinascimento in the center of the city, where government records are kept, as distinguished from the ecclesiastical records across the river at the Vatican. By a stroke of luck, or, we might say, an exceptional moment of premodern bureaucratic efficiency, Morandi's trial record, all 2,800 pages of it, has been preserved here. Urban took the unusual step of ordering all the imputations in the trial, political and criminal as well as theological, to be tried under a single trial judge rather than divided between the governor's court and the Inquisition. For this reason, at the time of writing, the records that are the basis of this book were in the public archive instead of hidden away, along with many other equally interesting documents, behind ecclesiastical discretion.

Surprisingly informative about some aspects of his life, the documents seem strangely mute about others. We know what Morandi read, who his friends were, how he spent much of his time. But what were his thoughts, his desires, his passions—who, indeed, was Morandi? This book responds by recounting the story of one man's search for esteem, revealing the dark secret concealed behind the monastery walls.

Several months in Morandi's life stand out in sharp relief: those leading up to the trial and during the trial itself. The rest of the months, years, decades, fade off into more or less obscurity. How far back must we go to discover the springs of his desire? How much information can we urge forth without asking leading questions, without organizing the inquiry so as to produce a spurious result, without torturing the subject into giving up a false confession? Simplicity is the enemy of accuracy, we can imagine the Baroque lawyers whispering in our ears. While we must surely take care to separate fact from opinion, we are as much concerned with what the principals in our case said and thought as with what actually happened.³

Our attentions as modern-day investigators are focused less on a physical person than on a tiny sampling of material from Morandi's life. A probate inventory, a library catalogue, a book of secrets, a collection of horoscopes, a scrap of poetry, a suspect's defense. These are the elements from which Morandi's accusers sought to build their case. From the same elements we must build our own. Each one leads out in new directions, beyond the courtroom, beyond the criminal, beyond the crime. Possessions accumulated during a lifetime shed light on a person's behavior. They also illuminate a time when objects tied individuals to their reality

4 INTRODUCTION

in a way no longer possible in our own commodity-filled, disposable environment. Books, about which notices are scattered thickly through our evidence, tell much about the bibliophile; they also tell about a world in which books were points of contact between one person and another, between societies and their cultures. And secrets, sharing the heart of our story along with prophecies, express the wishes of the seeker; they also express the longings, the aspirations, and at times the fears and loathings of an entire neighborhood, an entire community. The resonance of Morandi's story reaches the farthest corners of the civilization of his time, and our own.

As the story ventures out along these forgotten byways, the period and place seem more and more remote. Astrology here is not simply an intellectual curiosity; it is present in varying degrees nearly everywhere we look.⁴ It is only one of many traditional cultural patterns that seem to exist side by side with revolutionary ones. Thinkers of every sort—innovative and not—partake of an atmosphere of libertinism and free thinking that is impossible to dispel. And if the monarchs of Rome, or anywhere else, with all their new mechanisms of surveillance and control, never manage either to destroy the old culture or hasten the advent of the new, perhaps their authority is not as absolute as we once thought.⁵

And yet, some aspects of Morandi's world seem uncomfortably familiar. We should not be too surprised that even Galileo, the precursor of modern science, occasionally believed what he could not prove—and not just concerning the influence of the planets, the corpuscular theory of matter, and the origin of meteors. Nor should we be too surprised that many of his followers accepted his postulates on faith alone. After all, modern researchers on complex projects involving, say, cosmology and nuclear physics, or even history and anthropology, occasionally accept the affirmations of their colleagues in other specializations without testing for reliability.⁶ Perhaps blind belief and reasonable persuasion can occasionally coexist. Whether science be science or pseudoscience surely makes a difference, especially in matters of life and death. But the attitude of mind of those who put their faith in a scientific discipline beyond their comprehension might not always be so far removed as we would like to think from that of those who believe in forms of knowledge unapproved by the laboratory or by academe. We must imagine that the physicians who abandon the postulates of their training to recommend homeopathy or acupuncture or Zen meditation are just the more newsworthy examples. Our protagonist is not the only one whose mentality is attuned to myth in an age more and more preoccupied with facts.⁷

Real or imaginary, the natural knowledge bought and sold by our astrologers contributed to a market, a new set of commodities, that was to have a decisive influence on science. Astrology, along with the other

branches of the occult, not only contributed to science a fascination for nature.⁸ It also contributed an entrepreneurial point of view.⁹ In the new environment, preeminence in astrology belonged to the successful bearer of a spectacular prediction. Similarly, natural philosophers competed for the attention of powerful patrons and their reading audiences by spectacular performances, like Galileo's discovery of the moons of Jupiter for the Medici dukes.¹⁰ However, the transformation of astrology into an exclusively commercial enterprise eventually had the opposite effect. The competition of disciplines that could deliver more certainty, perhaps for less expense, helped finally to resolve the centuries-long debate about its credibility. By then, the marginalization of astrological knowledge from the mainstream of intellectual life was only a matter of time. Morandi, relentless in his search for new experiences and new advancement strategies, was the last great Roman astrologer of a dying age.