CHAPTER 3

Memory of Historical Events in Florentine “Ricordanze” (14th–15th Century)*

At first we will narrate...all the parts we wish, and as they happened...In the fourth and last will be the memory of certain grand facts that happened to our city and us, that is our proper selves, telling only the things happened in my time and earlier, that is that I remember having seen or heard first hand or from trustworthy witnesses, and no other.1

So writes Giovanni Morelli at the beginning of his ricordi, stating his wish to insert, in a text designed “to teach our children or descendants by true example and by cases that had happened to us,” a section regarding the story of the city.

Consequently, Morelli will dedicate a good half2 of his ricordi to Florentine history between 1363 and 1411,3 and more specifically after 1374, because – “with the chronicler's lively scruples” as Branca notes – he declared that he would write “not of things prior, because I am poorly informed of these things; one who tries to deal with things not of his own time, can never speak well of them.”4

Now, if it is true that Morelli’s Ricordi is an absolutely paradigmatic text of its kind, it is also true that it is not an “average” text. Thus this is not the type of


1 Morelli, Ricordi, pp. 83–85.
2 Even if it is the “fourth” part, which will be actually the third: see V. Branca, “Introduzione” to Morelli, Ricordi, p. 15 note.
3 In theory until 1421, but only one record belongs to this year.
4 Ibid., and p. 303.
source I intend to write about on this occasion. The title I have proposed would instead take into consideration a more representative sample of the “average-ness” of Florentine ricordanze. I will exclude from this vast corpus all of those that are more specifically historical or chronicle-related (and so all the “diaries,” “chronicles” or cronachette, the commentaries and other texts similarly defined) as well as some for which the lack of autograph manuscripts makes it difficult or impossible to reconstruct their original characteristics, in order to examine those that make up the majority: the libri di ricordi in which the norm is represented by a majority of economic annotations, among which there is the occasional note of an “historical event,” that is, notes concerning a larger context than the personal and private one of the writer.\(^5\) The subject of this essay will be the Florentine ricordanze that are outside the circle known as the “three crowns” of the genre (Pitti, Morelli, Velluti) and often assimilated to “chronicles”\(^6\) for the way they cover a whole series of city events. And in any case not those texts in which the author’s intent to describe a series of public happenings more explicitly and consciously is evident, but those “family books,” as they have been recently and properly named, that are much more common, and in which the narrative parts are less diffuse, but which are nevertheless vehicles of “memories” regarding the “city.”

Even though not part of this group, Morelli’s words still offer a “key” that can help interpret other writings, less diffuse and systematic than his own, but no less important or representative, and this is why I mentioned them epigraphically.

I would like to say beforehand that this essay is more an inquiry than a conclusion, exposing the first provisional fruits of a broader study meant to verify and deepen in some directions the results that some scholars have obtained over recent years, and in particular – in this specific case – to take a census of and analyze the Florentine texts of this type that contain historically interesting notations. While the modes and motivations of 18th century erudition and positivistic 19th–20th century historiography (that chose only the things thought historically significant, ignoring or eliding the complexity of that

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5 This analysis excludes, therefore, the texts specifically analyzed, for example, by Bec, Les marchands écrivains. In this work Bec – besides treating the “marchands moralistes” (among which Paolo da Certaldo, and Mazzei in his relationship with Datini), and a “marchand con- teur” (the Lucchese Giovanni Sercambi), both external to our scope – distinguishes between “Marchands mémorialistes” (Morelli and Pitti) and “Marchands historiographes” (Gino di Neri Capponi and Goro Dati).