CHAPTER 9

Staging the Passion in the Ritual City: Stational Crosses and Confraternal Spectacle in Late Renaissance Milan

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It is a Friday night in Milan at the turn of the seventeenth century. The hour is nearing midnight and the streets are quiet, save for the ringing of church bells. At various points in the darkened city, in the piazze and on street corners, companies of men and women begin to gather at large columns surmounted by crosses. The lanterns arrayed at the bases of the columns and the processional crosses waiting nearby indicate that the assembled crowds will not be staying long.1 Carrying a cross before them and chanting the Ambrosian Litany of Saints—“Holy Mary, pray for us! Saint Michael, pray for us!”—all at once they begin to move. The chorus is amplified as companies meet along the way, falling in behind one another to process along the main arteries of the city until they converge at its heart: the immense cathedral, still under construction. Here and there, flashes of torchlight reveal small panel paintings mounted on these processional crosses, each depicting an episode of the Passion of Christ.

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1 According to the Trattato delle croci erette in Milano, written in the seventeenth century by Matroniano Binago, one of the ‘visitors’ assigned by the archbishop to supervise the confraternities of Santa Croce, each confraternity planning on processing “habbino a metter fora la sua Croce qual son[0] solito portar in processione insieme con li lanteroni al piede della colonna ... e questo sia de fare per dare segno che sia de andare in processione”; Trattato delle croci erette in Milano, Archivio Storico Diocesano (hereafter ASDM), section XIV, vol. 166, q. 11, fol. 23r.
The Ecce Homo originates at the Carrobbio on Corso di Porta Ticinese; from across the city in Porta Orientale, outside the church of San Babila, comes the Entombment. As the companies join together the Passion story slowly coalesces, panel by panel, until the entire cycle is present, from Christ taking leave of his mother to the interment of his corpse in the sepulcher. They then file into the Duomo to address their devotions to Milan's holiest relic, a nail from the Crucifixion, acquired by St. Ambrose and conserved in the cathedral's vaults. With the details of the cityscape obscured by the nocturnal setting, spectators looking upon these images of Christ—along with the mass of solemnly processing figures calling upon the saints, and the children costumed as angels marching with them—might think this another place entirely, as if Paradise itself had been opened, transforming familiar streets into the dusty road to Calvary or the shimmering avenues of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

These companies were the confraternities of Santa Croce and this was the “ritual city” (la città rituale) created in Milan under the Cardinal-Archbishop Carlo Borromeo (t. 1564–84), one of the chief architects of Catholic reform in Italy. The “Borromean experiment,” as Wietse de Boer has described it, aimed to sanctify Milanese urban space and daily life through ritual and discipline, prescribing a rigorous program of daily prayer, the observance of liturgical feasts with elaborate processions, participation in lay confraternities, and the reinvigoration of the cult of relics and saints. These initiatives gained intensity during the catastrophic plague of 1576, which the archbishop proclaimed was a divine punishment for the sins of the Milanese and which killed over 17,000 before its abatement in the following spring. Throughout the epidemic, Borromeo organized public prayers and penitential processions to cleanse the

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