

## *Some Queries Addressed to Myself* \*

CARLO GINZBURG

1. I am deeply honoured by the prestigious prize that has been awarded to me. I thank the jury and in particular, Quentin Skinner for his generous words, and especially for mentioning the coherence in the subjects and approach which are detectable in my research. I feel flattered – but then I immediately hear the voice of the devil’s advocate (a voice which accompanies me, like a basso continuo): “You dealt with witches and Piero della Francesca, with a miller put on trial by the Inquisition and with questions of method: where is the unity in all this? What is the thread that ties such strikingly heterogeneous themes together?”

It is an insidious objection, because it hides an invitation to teleology: a vice that everyone – especially historians – ought to beware of. To go back and search for an underlying theme in a research trajectory that has gone on for over fifty years is possible, of course – but on the condition of tacitly eliminating chance, unawareness, the alternatives that were rejected or simply ignored as they gradually emerged. In order not to fall into the trap that the devil’s advocate is setting for me, I will avoid the running thread metaphor and will try to use a different one.

2. On 12 July 1934, Walter Benjamin, in exile in Denmark, where he took refuge after escaping from the Nazis, wrote in his diary:

*Yesterday, after a game of chess, Brecht said: So, if Korsch comes [Karl Korsch, the Marxist theorist], we will have to think up a new game for him. A game where the positions are not always the same: where the function of every piece changes after it has stood in the same square for a while: it should either become stronger or weaker. This way the game doesn’t develop, it stays the same for too long.*<sup>1</sup>

Brecht wanted to change the rules of chess so that they would be closer to reality, which is in perpetual movement. I will reformulate his proposal by applying it (with an eye to *Il cavallo e la torre* [The Horse and the Tower] by Vittorio Foa) to an infinitesimal fragment of reality: a research itinerary which is the one I have followed. I will try to describe it as a game of chess in which the pieces, instead of being arranged at the beginning, are introduced as the game goes on. The game commenced one day in the autumn of 1959. I was twenty. I was in the library of the Scuola Normale di Pisa, where I had been studying for two years. All of a sudden I decided three things: that I wanted to be a historian; that I wanted to study witchcraft trials; that what I wanted to study was not the persecution of witchcraft, but the victims of persecution – the women and men accused of being witches and

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<sup>1</sup> W. Benjamin, *Avanguardia e rivoluzione. Saggi sulla letteratura*, introduction notes by C. Cases, transl. A. Marietti, Turin 1973, p. 221.

sorcerers. This nebulous project, formulated with great conviction and in the most complete ignorance imaginable, would not have been born without the powerful impression aroused by my reading Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, Carlo Levi's *Christ stopped at Eboli* and Ernesto de Martino's *Il mondo magico* (The Magic World). But there was another element, which I did not realize until many years later: in the emotional identification with the victims of persecution, and in the impulse to study them, there was an unconscious projection of my Jewish identity, which the persecution had reinforced.<sup>2</sup>

3. At the end of the 1950s, beliefs and practices linked to witchcraft were themes reserved for anthropologists. Scholars of European history tended to be concerned with the so-called witch hunts (a theme that in any event was considered marginal). The situation was in part to change shortly thereafter. In 1977 Arnaldo Momigliano wrote that "the most pervasive characteristic" of the fifteen years between 1961 and 1976 was perhaps "the attention to oppressed and/or minority groups within more advanced civilizations: women, children, slaves, men of colour, or more simply heretics, farmers and workers".<sup>3</sup> Momigliano observed that in the course of those fifteen years, anthropologists or ethnographers had acquired "unprecedented prestige" from historians. However, he did not dwell on an obstacle that the historians who wanted to study "oppressed and/or minority groups within more advanced civilizations" had been forced to come to terms with. In any society, power relationships condition access to documentation, and its characteristics. The voices of those who belong to those oppressed and/or minority groups are usually filtered down to us by extraneous, if not hostile figures: chroniclers, notaries, bureaucrats, judges and so on. In the case of the witch trials that I wanted to study, the psychological and cultural violence used by judges, at times accompanied by torture, tended to distort the voices of the accused men and women in a pre-established direction. (It is not a matter of chance that the political trials carried out in the course of the twentieth century have often been defined, polemically, as "witch hunts"). How can this obstacle be overcome?

This was the situation that I could reasonably have expected, and that I in fact encountered in the first years of my explorations in the lay and ecclesiastical archives in Italy, where Delio Cantimori directed me. Then I had a stroke of luck: "by pure chance, or" as Carlo Dionisotti once wrote "by the norm that governs research on the unknown", I discovered the witch trials held by the Inquisition in Friuli in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries against the *benandanti* (literally, "those who go doing good").<sup>4</sup> The inquisitors repeatedly asked the meaning of this incomprehensible word from the men and women who said they were, in fact, "*benandanti*". This was invariably the answer: since they had been born wrapped in a caul, they were forced to fight in spirit against witches and sorcerers four times a year

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<sup>2</sup> C. Ginzburg, "Streghe e sciamani" [1993] in *Il filo e le tracce. Vero falso finto*, Milan 2006, pp. 281–93 (*Witches and Shamans*, «New Left Review», 200, July-August 1993, pp. 75–85).

<sup>3</sup> A. Momigliano, "Linee per una valutazione della storiografia del quindicennio 1961–1976" [1977], reprinted in ID, *Sesto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico*, I, Rome 1980, pp. 377–94, in particular p. 377.

<sup>4</sup> C. Dionisotti, "Resoconto di una ricerca interrotta", in ID., *Scritti di storia della letteratura italiana*, II, 1963–1971, Rome 2009, ed. T. Basile, V. Fera, S. Villari, p. 325.

for the fertility of the fields. For the inquisitors these were either absurdities or lies: in their eyes, the benandanti were obviously witches and sorcerers. But in order for this identification to become reality, it took fifty years. Harassed by the questions and threats of the inquisitors, the benandanti incorporated the traits of the model that had been shown to them (or better, forced upon them) little by little: and the detailed descriptions of the battles they fought in spirit for the fertility of the fields, armed with fennel branches, left room for the more or less stereotyped image of the witches' sabbath.<sup>5</sup>

The difference between the expectations of the inquisitors and the answers of the benandanti indicated that the latter emerged from a deep stratum of peasant culture – whence the exceptional value of that Friulian evidence. The attempt to grasp the voices of the victims of persecution was crowned (I thought) by initial success, which opened unexplored terrain. In retrospect, I am led to think that all of my research sprang from that first book, even if it happened in an unpredictable, and above all non-linear way. (That is why I am fond of the metaphor of chess: in the course of the game, the different pieces are moved on the chess board according to their own logic, obeying specific rules; but there is only one game).

4. To try to reconstruct the beliefs and attitudes of the accused through the distorted trials and the expectations of the judges seemed, and was indeed, paradoxical. All my problems sprang from that preliminary choice. I had to learn to read between the lines, to gather the tiniest clues, to find ripples under the surface of the text that signalled the presence of profound tensions, that could not be reduced to stereotype. Without realising it, I was trying to work on archival documents by applying the lessons of hermeneutics carried out on literary texts that I had learned from Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach and Gianfranco Contini. The impulse to reflect on method (today I would say: to sterilize the tools of analysis) emerged from concrete research – even if at a certain point I gave in to the temptation to suggest a genealogy and a justification of the method I identified with and was practising. But when I published that paper – *Spie* (Clues) – my research in the Udine Archbishopric Archive had already taken another direction.

In the preface to *I benandanti* (1966 – translated as *The Night Battles*) I had written: “This Friulian testimony reveals a continuous criss-crossing of trends enduring for decades and even centuries, and of individual, private, and frequently wholly unconscious, reactions. It is apparently impossible to make history from such reactions, and yet without them, the history of ‘collective mentalities’ becomes nothing more than a series of disembodied and abstract tendencies and forces”.<sup>6</sup> Today, in this distantiation from the *Annales* of the second generation (from which I also learned a great deal) I read a potential opening towards a further reduction of scale: research concentrated on a single individual.<sup>7</sup> But this further move needed time. At the beginning of the 1960s, going through the 18th century index of the

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<sup>5</sup> *I benandanti. Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento*, Turin 1966 (*The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, translated by Anne and John Tedeschi, Baltimore, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> *I benandanti*, p. XI (*The Night Battles*, p. XVII).

<sup>7</sup> See also A. Bensa's entry “Anthropologie et histoire”, in *Historiographies*, eds. C. Delacroix, F. Dosse, P. Garcia, and N. Offenstadt, Paris 2010, I, pp. 49–50.

first thousand Inquisition trials preserved in the Udine Archbishopric Archive, I had fallen upon a summary, condensed in a few lines, of two trials against a peasant, guilty of maintaining that the world was born from rotten matter. That peasant was the miller Domenico Scandella, called Menocchio. But seven years went by before I decided to take up his case, and another seven, understandably, before *The Cheese and the Worms*, the book dedicated to him, was published. In that hesitation, and even more in the polemical, aggressive and at the same time defensive tone of my introduction, I experience again the element of risk that the success of that book cancelled out. To dedicate a book – not a footnote or a paper – but a book, to a sixteenth century miller was at the time (not anymore today, I guess) anything but an obvious choice.

5. I have spoken about “reduction of scale”: a typical term of microhistory, the historiographic current introduced by a group of Italian historians who coalesced around the journal *Quaderni storici* in the second half of the 1970s. I, too, was part of that group; and both *The Cheese and the Worms* and the essay *Spie* (Clues) have been often connected to microhistory, or at least to one of its versions. Labels do not interest me, but the impulse that generated microhistory does. I am convinced that the reduction of scale in observation (not of the object of investigation, let’s be clear about this) is a precious cognitive tool. As Marcel Mauss writes, one intensely studied case can be the starting point for a generalization.<sup>8</sup> I would add: yes, above all if it is an anomalous case, because anomaly implies the norm (whereas the opposite is not true).<sup>9</sup> And I would go on by distinguishing between the generalization of answers and the generalization of questions. It seems to me that the potential wealth of case studies is mainly linked to the latter.<sup>10</sup>

*The Cheese and the Worms* is a book that was born in the atmosphere of the political and social struggles in Italy in the 1970s, but it has continued to live thanks to readers born in other places and periods of time. Its unexpected success is first of all to be attributed to the extraordinary personality of Menocchio, the protagonist of the book. His challenge of the political and religious authorities, nourished by a culture born of the interaction between oral and written culture, was capable of reaching individuals who were far from his world – and, I might add, from mine. Among those who reacted – often in an understandably polemical way – there were also professional historians. If I am not mistaken, the book has shown the unexpected complexity that is hidden behind expressions historians often take for granted: from “popular classes” to “peasants”, from “learning to read and write” to “reading”. More generally speaking, the book rebutted once and for all the thesis that had been formulated by an authoritative historian, according to whom the less privileged classes of Europe of the early modern era were only accessible through statistics.<sup>11</sup>

6. I mentioned generalizations which start from one case. After the publication of

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<sup>8</sup> M. Mauss, “Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés Eskimos” [1906], in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, ed. Cl. Lévi-Strauss, 3rd ed., Paris 1966, pp. 389–477.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. C. Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 2nd ed., München und Leipzig 1934, p. 22, who cites a passage by an unnamed “Protestant theologian” (Kierkegaard).

<sup>10</sup> *Penser par cas*, eds. J.-Cl. Passeron and J. Revel, Paris 2005.

<sup>11</sup> *Il formaggio e i vermi*, introduction, p. XIX (the reference is to François Furet).

*The Cheese and the Worms* I decided to develop a hypothesis that seemed to strongly emerge from the case of Menocchio: the circularity between élite and subaltern cultures (to use Gramsci's term). An attempt in this direction led me to the traces of a Jewish convert, Costantino Saccardino, tried by the Holy Office, first in Venice and then in Bologna, and ultimately burnt at the stake in 1621 because he was involved in a conspiracy that smacked of heresy. Since a copy of the Venetian trial had been sent to Rome, I assumed that it might have been preserved in the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (at the time inaccessible). This led me to write a letter to Pope Wojtyła, in which I asked for the archive to be opened to scholars. From the Pope's secretary, I received a reply that took note (perhaps with a touch of benevolent irony) of my enthusiasm for research, but informed me that the Saccardino trial was untraceable – probably destroyed. Twenty years later, as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger spoke at the conference that was held in 1998 at this Accademia dei Lincei to celebrate the opening of the archives of the Holy Office in Rome as decided by Pope Wojtyła. On that occasion Ratzinger read an excerpt from my letter, stating that it was the scholar who had defined himself as “born Jewish and atheist” to “inspire a moment of reflection that constituted the contemporary history of the opening of the Archives”.<sup>12</sup> A generous, too generous acknowledgement. But in the meantime, my research had taken a different direction.

7. Once more I will use the model of the chess board, because it is compatible with zig-zagging, non-rectilinear movement, and nonetheless is conditioned by an initial opening move – which in my case, was related to the benandanti. Once again, there was a chance discovery: a trial, published in a journal of Baltic history, against an old werewolf named Thiess, which I came across before sending the final version of the manuscript of *The Night Battles* to the publisher. The trial, which took place in Jürgensburg (today's Zaube) around the end of the seventeenth century, was altogether anomalous: Thiess stated that, since he was born with a caul, he had to go “to the end of the sea” three times a year with the other werewolves to fight against the devils to ensure the fertility of the fields. The analogies with the benandanti were evident, but they required comparative research that I did not feel capable of doing: in the preface, I stated that I had not “dealt with the question of the relationship which undoubtedly must exist between benandanti and shamans” – a statement that was both audacious and prudent.<sup>13</sup> Before I decided to commit myself to this task almost twenty years elapsed. I started to collect a great deal of material, without understanding what I was doing; but before long, I stopped, and threw myself into a completely different kind of project – research on Piero della Francesca, which I condensed in a small book entitled *Indagini su Piero* (1981; translated as *The Enigma of Piero*).

I realize that the itinerary that I am describing seems to be dominated by caprice, if not by frivolity. Actually, a few years later, I realized that my seeming diversion towards Piero della Francesca was obscurely trying to reckon with the main obstacle I had been facing in an entirely different domain, in my attempt to insert the case of

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<sup>12</sup> Card. J. Ratzinger, “Le ragioni di un'apertura”, *L'apertura degli Archivi del Sant'Uffizio Romano* (Roma, 22 gennaio 1998), Rome 1998, p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> *I benandanti*, pp. 37–40, XV–XVI (*The Night Battles*, p. XXI).

the benandanti into a comparative perspective. This obstacle can be connected to two terms: morphology and history, and how they relate to each other. In my research on a group of works by Piero, I examined non-stylistic data linked to iconography and to patronage, thus constructing a pictorial itinerary and a chronology that I compared with the one that had been proposed authoritatively on the basis of stylistic data. Behind this experiment, born of an old passion of mine for Piero and for painting, lay the pages of Roberto Longhi on Palma il Vecchio in the *Precisioni* on the Galleria Borghese, and the book by Federico Zeri on the Master of the Barberini Panels, *Two Paintings, Philology and a Name*.<sup>14</sup> From them I had learned that a configuration of formal data trace out the itinerary, often imperfectly known, of a stylistic personality that might correspond to a recorded individual name. Likewise, I thought, a configuration made up of myths morphologically similar to the one centred on the benandanti must be related to specific historical connections – unless those morphological affinities lead back to human nature.

I struggled over this alternative and its implications (which I will not talk about here) for over fifteen years. The book that I finally wrote – *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba* (1989, translated as *Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witches Sabbath*) – inserts the beliefs of the benandanti into a much larger picture based on evidence that covers a span of millennia, collected by demonologists, bishops, anthropologists, folklorists across the Eurasian continent. Unlike the evidence on the benandanti, these documents almost never give the names of the actors. In the abovementioned paper on the characteristics of historiography in the fifteen years from 1961 to 1976, Momigliano had referred to the “spread of a-chronic structuralist interpretations in addition to the traditional diachronic historiography”.<sup>15</sup> From this intellectual climate descends the prolonged dialogue with structuralism (a version of the dialogue with the devil’s advocate), which inspired the project for *Ecstasies*: to put an anonymous, a-chronic morphology at the service of history, in order to make conjectures about buried historical connections.

8. “The sources must be read between the lines (*in controtuce*)” Arsenio Frugoni used to say in his lessons at Pisa. I think that these words vaccinated me against naive positivism. I could not have imagined that one day those same words would have helped me to reject the neo-skeptic positions of those who upheld the impossibility of tracing a rigorous distinction between historical and fictional narratives. I was involved in this discussion for twenty years, in large part coinciding with the period I taught at UCLA. Among the papers that I dedicated to this theme, there is one entitled *Le voci dell’altro* (Alien Voices) that analyzes a page from a book by the Jesuit Charles Le Gobien, the *Histoire des îles Marianes*, which appeared in the year 1700: a harangue pronounced by the indigenous chief Hurao exhorting his people to revolt against the Spanish invaders. A close reading of the text shows that the harangue cleverly reworks, as one might predict, a series of classical citations: first and foremost, the speech delivered by the indigenous chief Calgacus in Tacitus’ *Agricola*, denouncing the misdeeds of the Roman Empire. Hurao’s harangue is the fruit of the

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<sup>14</sup> R. Longhi, “Precisioni nelle Gallerie italiane. La Galleria Borghese” [1926–1928], in *Opere complete*, II, Florence 1967, pp. 283–287; F. Zeri, *Due dipinti, la filologia e un nome: il Maestro delle Tavole Barberini*, Turin 1961.

<sup>15</sup> A. Momigliano, “Linee”, p. 377.

imagination – but not completely.<sup>16</sup> Among the accusations that he makes against the Europeans, there is that of having brought to the Marianne Islands flies and other insects that did not exist there before. In a footnote, Le Gobien mocks the passage, calling it absurd: a residue incrustated on the smooth, rhetorically impeccable surface of Hurao’s harangue.

The trials against the *benandanti* are a formally dialogical document, articulated in questions and answers. In the *Histoire des îles Mariannes*, the dialogical dimension suddenly flares up in a passage in Le Gobien’s footnote. But the hermeneutic strategy that I used in the two cases is essentially the same: to grasp the tensions and dissonances within a text. In the second, the author looks at what he just wrote without understanding it. From that note at the bottom of the page, there creeps in, as if through a crack, something uncontrolled: an extraneous voice, a fragment of that extra-textual reality that the neo-skeptics present as unattainable.

9. No text is immune to cracks: not even the poem that a supreme artificer has controlled down to the last detail. Even in the *Commedia* there is a blind spot, an element of the reality that Dante’s conscious “I” did not manage to master. But to talk about this research in progress would be premature.<sup>17</sup> The game is still on.

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<sup>16</sup> C. Ginzburg, “Le voci dell’altro. Una rivolta indigena nelle Isole Marianne”, in *Rapporti di forza. Storia retorica prova*, Milan 2000, pp. 87–108 (*History, Rhetoric, and Proof*, Hanover 1999). In *Guampedia: The Encyclopedia of Guam*, Le Gobien’s page is reproduced as the “transcription” of a speech that was really delivered: cfr. [guampedia.com/chiefs-hurao/](http://guampedia.com/chiefs-hurao/).

<sup>17</sup> A preview in C. Ginzburg, “Dante’s Blind Spot (*Inferno* XVI–XVII)”, in *Dante’s Plurilingualism. Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, ed. S. Fortuna, M. Gragnolati, J. Trabant, Oxford 2010, pp. 149–63.