

On “Coherence” and “Heterogeneity” in the Work of Carlo Ginzburg

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There is a tension at the beginning of Ginzburg’s paper (“Some Queries Addressed to Myself”) between “coherence” and “heterogeneity”, between unity and multiplicity: the coherence that Quentin Skinner recognized in his research, and the different themes of his writings. He tries to find a solution in a beautiful image taken from Benjamin (and which Benjamin in turn takes from Brecht): the idea of a game of chess 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 image seems better to him, or less dangerous, than the image of the thread, which can conceal “an invitation to teleology”: this metaphor appears to him more suitable to represent the perpetual movement of reality (and at this point Ginzburg refers to another person who was very dear and very important for him, Vittorio Foa).

From the very beginning the reader can appreciate one of the characteristics of Ginzburg’s intellectual style: his attention to metaphors as cognitive tools, with the richness and the danger that any kind of metaphor signifies (or bears). I would like to recall, for example, “Distanza e prospettiva: due metafore,” in *Occhiacci di legno*.¹ It seems to me that, as we can imagine, Ginzburg’s reconstruction of his intellectual itinerary gives us an idea of coherence and substantial unity. He underlines many times the dimensions of the game, where the pieces are introduced as the game proceeds. But it is a game that implies, and involves, the answer of the player, and the answers have their own interior logic, which the reconstruction renders visible. It is true, as Ginzburg says, that in research there is an element of luck, a component of chance, but he quotes Carlo Dionisotti, who said that “pure chance” is “the norm that governs research on the unknown.” When a researcher finds or comes across some documents in the archives by chance, in a certain sense he is looking for them, and they are waiting for him. Above all, he is able to formulate the “right questions,” to ask them for an answer to the questions he has in mind, and also to make them richer. It seems to me that Ginzburg’s paper is a brief but strongly unitary intellectual autobiography that gives an idea of incredibly rich research and, at the same time, makes a choice; we find mentioned here only a part of his writings, but we also find a schema where we can position his other works. I would like to ask him if, for any reason, there are other of his works that found no place in this brief reconstruction and that he considers important.

I was very moved by the very beginning of the story, when he mentions a place, the library of the Scuola Normale in Pisa, in 1959, where he decided his future (to be an historian), the object of his research (witchcraft trials) and the perspective, the method to use (“what I wanted to study was not the persecution of witchcraft, but

¹ English translation: Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance* (London 2002).

the victims of persecution”). As the tradition of the art of memory has showed us, places (*loci*) are very important tools, both for remembering and narrating memories. And the library of the Scuola Normale is a very important *locus memoriae* for generations of scholars. It is very interesting to note the three books he quotes as essentials for his decision. Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, Carlo Levi’s *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Ernesto de Martino’s *The Magic World*. They are emblematic, a kind of image of memory of a destiny, of a future research. Gramsci was a politician, a philosopher, a victim of fascism, a thinker who decided in prison on great topics of research, *für ewig*, as he writes. Carlo Levi was a writer, also a victim of fascism, who drew on his personal experience also to rediscover a forgotten part of Italy. Ernesto De Martino was an anthropologist. We find here a kind of prophecy of some of the most important lines of research and some of the qualities that characterize Ginzburg’s work: the interest in history, in the rediscovery of the culture of “ceti subalterni”, or more exactly the circularity between élite and subaltern cultures; his passage from history to anthropology, from *I benandanti* (*The Night Battles*) and *Il formaggio e i vermi* (*The Cheese and the Worms*) to the *Storia notturna* (*Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath*), where, as he writes, he engages with structuralism and tries “to put an a-chronic morphology at the service of history.” The quotation of Carlo Levi, an artist, a writer, is also very important: a literary component is strongly present in Ginzburg’s work, first of all in his style, in his capacity for narration, which for a long time was very peculiar and very isolated in Italian scholarly production.

Every book and essay by Carlo Ginzburg bears witness to an exciting and often challenging intellectual adventure: it is a *historiographical experiment*. I think that the quality of the style I have just mentioned has also contributed to his incredible international success, together with the ability to link a very specific topic to general problems of method. He is a scholar who always tries to look at himself also from a distance, from a perspective, placing before our eyes the method, the difficulties, the risk and the methodological implications of his research. Reading his works has sometimes led me to think of Italo Calvino, the last Calvino, who represents himself as a writer and as a reader, with a kind of exterior perspective. It is very interesting to see how some of the methodological indications formulated by Carlo Ginzburg have been widely used, becoming, as it were, shared critical tools (I am thinking, for example, of “Spie: radici di un paradigma indiziario”²), employed in various fields.

But allow me to return to the literary qualities of Ginzburg’s work. Since the field of historical studies opened its borders many decades ago, historians have been using visual images and literary texts for their research as well. But it is very rare to find specific attention towards the quality of the texts. Usually they are used as documents, and are not considered in terms of their peculiar language and genre. This is not the case with Carlo Ginzburg: his research is not generically interdisciplinary. As he himself writes, from the very beginning he tried “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.” It is a very fruitful approach: the texts of the trials are analyzed in their complexity, in order to give new visibility to the different languages, the different human and social

² English edition: “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (London and Baltimore 1989).

experiences that are hidden and censured within them. The documents, the texts thus become the result of a fight, which, thanks to the analysis of the historian, recommences and opens up once again, in order to give new life to voices that have been cancelled and suppressed. The result is a kind of rebirth, a very good response to Furet's idea that the "the less privileged classes of Europe of the early modern era were only accessible through statistics."

In addition to the great literary scholars mentioned in the paper, some others have been very important for Carlo Ginzburg: his friend Cesare Garboli, for example, and the theorist Francesco Orlando, who was deeply interested in analyzing the hidden dimensions of the literary text, in order to recognize the secret desires, the unconscious topics that the metaphors mask and communicate.

Ginzburg has used many different literary tools in his research: I would like to recall the idea of "straniamento" (estrangement) deriving from Russian formalism, and how the rhetorical instrument of ekphrasis, of a powerful visualization, a precise description, was used in ancient historiography as evidence of authenticity, of a direct experience that assures us that what is narrated is true. This idea was very important and useful to me when I was studying some utopian texts, and also some cantos of Ariosto, for example in order to understand the highly complex introduction to Alcina's island.

Besides the eminent scholars I mentioned previously, one historian, Arsenio Frugoni, taught Carlo Ginzburg to read the sources "tra le righe," "in controtuce," that is to say, between the lines.

So we can see that from the very beginning Carlo Ginzburg was equipped with the intellectual and literary tools that, as he says, "vaccinated [him] against naive positivism." But it was difficult to imagine how strong and dangerous the idea of history as a rhetorical construction, as a literary and ideological "invention," could become in the future. As a scholar and teacher in California, at UCLA, Ginzburg has for many years been engaged in rejecting the neo-skeptic positions, with their most negative consequences, like the negation of the Shoah and of other terrible historical events. It has been a very difficult and a very important battle.

I would like to conclude with a question. Ginzburg quotes another of the scholars who have been very important for him, Arnaldo Momigliano, who 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.'" It is very clear to Ginzburg that a large part of his research is linked to the great hopes of the sixties, to the search for general political and social change, for renewal. Only later, he writes, did he realize that in his interest for "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." There is a general trend: after the universalism of the sixties, the dimension of identity – of different identities – became stronger. My question is: is it possible today to rethink historical research in order to link it to the hope for change? In order to give it a new ethical dimension?