BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Philosopher A Preface to Sartre
Madame Bovary on Trial Rethinking Intellectual History:
Texts, Contexts, Language

CO-EDITOR

Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives

HISTORY & CRITICISM

Dominick LaCapra

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS
ITHACA AND LONDON
spent his time in exile writing a work that ought to be welcome to a prince, especially to a new prince. He dedicated *The Prince* to Florence's new ruler, Guiliano de'Medici, whose favor he hoped to win. The story that relates its genesis in a realistic myth of origins may be taken to emblematize the situation of historiography and related "human sciences" as complex modes of discourse in which an exchange with the past is always bound up with a present dialogue. And the vestimentary ritual with which Machiavelli clothed his own dialogues with the dead may be read as a sign that political discourse, while always enmeshed in problems of power and interest, may also open itself to broader currents that test and contest the limits of a conventional understanding of both politics and discourse.

41. In an unpublished essay ("PeT miei carmi: Machiavelli's Discourses of Exile"), John Najemy subtly shows how the discussion of politics as a discourse of mastery was at times playfully intertwined, in the letters between Machiavelli and Vettori, with a discussion of love and the impolitic loss of control it often brought.


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*The Cheese and the Worms:*

The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian

... in wanting (at a distance which is the remoteness of double reflection) to read solo the original text of the individual, human existence-relationship, the old text, well known, handed down from the fathers-to read it through yet once more, if possible in a more heartfelt way.

Søren Kierkegaard, "A First and Last Declaration,"

*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

Then they urged him to talk, and Menocchio threw
cautions to the wind.

Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*

N 1983, I spent the last days of December in Ithaca, New York.

I would have preferred a place offering a more temperate climate.

Seeking shelter from the inquisitorial rigor of an especially harsh winter, I found my thoughts turning once again to a topic that has tended to preoccupy me in the recent past: the state of contempor ary historiography. Metahistorical commentary can itself be a bone-chilling affair. It is a process of double reflection, twice removed from the ostensible object of the historian's quest-a
process that makes the immediacy of past experience seem especially remote. How can such a seemingly inhuman enterprise enable one to read old texts, indeed the text of existence itself, in a more heartfelt way? I would much prefer to devote my time and energy to more congenial, indeed storylike matters—perhaps to rummage in rich deposits of archival papers and to tell their tales in ingratiatingly narrative forms. But, leafing through the pages of recent historical works, I come upon claims that capture my curiosity and configurations of ideas that challenge my understanding. At times, I almost seem to be in another world.

Historiography today is not in that state of fermentation to be found in fields such as literary criticism and Continental philosophy. Historians tend to pride themselves on their immunity to the wormlike doubt and self-reflective scrutiny that have appeared in other areas of inquiry, notably those infiltrated by recent French thought. Far from seeing recent critical initiatives as holding forth the angelic promise of a reformation or even a renaissance in historiographical studies, many historians have been seized with what might almost be called a counter-reformational zeal in reasserting orthodox procedures. But the contemporary historical profession is not a solid block, and even the most traditional scholars show an openness to at least a few newer movements. If one were to generalize somewhat rashly about prominent trends in the profession, one might list the following: an inclination to rely on a social definition of context as an explanatory matrix; a shift toward an interest in popular culture; a reconceptualization of culture in terms of collective discourses, mentalities, worldviews, and even "languages"; a redefinition of intellectual history as the study of social meaning as historically constituted; and an archivally based documentary realism that treats artifacts as quarries for facts in the reconstitution of societies and cultures of the past. These trends are.

in many significant ways progressive in comparison with earlier practices, but they may become dubious when they engender dogmatic sociocentrism, methodological populism, the refusal to recognize the historical significance of exceptional aspects of culture, and an oversimplified understanding of language and meaning frequently attended by a reductive use of texts and documents.

A recent book which, I think, embodies both the promise and the dangers of contemporary trends has captured the historical imagination: Carlo Ginzburg's _The Cheese and the Worms._ It is rare for such a small book (128 pages of principal text, 15 of preface, 43 of notes) to make such large waves in the profession. Ginzburg's translators accurately observe: "The book has been rightly hailed as one of the most significant recent contributions to the ongoing field of study, the popular culture of early modern Europe." Roger Chartier gives a more extensive account of why the book has attracted notice:

Bakhtin is turned upside down, since a system of representations is constructed from fragments borrowed from scholarly and bookish culture, giving them another meaning because in the system's foundation there is another culture: "Behind the books pondered by Menocchio we have discovered a reading code; and behind this code, a whole stratum of oral culture." We cannot then postulate as necessary the connection established by Felix Gilbert, between the social broadening of the field of research in intellectual history and the recourse to statistical procedure. In fact, if under certain conditions the quantitative approach (internal or external) to the most elaborate texts can be accepted as legitimate, conversely, when the archives permit it, the intellectual work of the most anonymous of readers may be amenable to the analytical procedures ordinarily reserved for the "greatest" thinkers.

Thus Ginzburg, through an imaginative variant of research into the response of a reader, has revealed a mode of qualitative social history that presumably employs techniques of "high" or "elite" intellectual history. In the process, he opens to us the "cosmos" of a sixteenth-century miller, the unforgettable Domenico Scandella, called Menocchio. Although I am qualified neither by field nor by period specialization, I would like to attempt at least a partial reading of Ginzburg's text—a text that is itself to some significant extent emblematic of the "cosmos" of the twentieth-century historian. The similitude between Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* vis-à-vis the contemporary historical profession and Menocchio's "world view" vis-à-vis sixteenth-century popular culture is of course far from complete. While Ginzburg's remarkable book has received widespread acclaim, not all historians praising it would agree with all aspects of its argument, even if they might assent to its general conception of the direction in which historical research should go. For another thing, for Ginzburg we have a written text while for Menocchio we have only a putative "world view" pieced together inferentially on the basis of two inquisition registers. (The trials were separated by fifteen years, and as an old man, Menocchio was burned at the stake.)

A recurrent motif of Ginzburg's book is the significance of discrepancies between what occurs in the texts Menocchio read and the active, indeed aggressive readings of them Menocchio offered. Ginzburg interprets these symptomatic discrepancies as indications of an oral, popular (more specifically, peasant) culture that unconsciously served as the grid or filter for Menocchio's readings. I would like to point to a discrepancy between the role of this interpretation in the dominant argument of Ginzburg's principal text and what tends to surface at times in his two prefaces (one to the English translation and the other to the Italian edition), in one important footnote, and in fleeting remarks throughout the text that are expanded in an almost explosively forceful crescendo toward the end of the principal text. This discrepancy indicates an important tension in Ginzburg's conception of what Menocchio stands for and, more generally, in his account of the relations among popular, high, and dominant culture in the sixteenth century and over time. One may initially formulate this tension in terms of the contrast between an idea of the autonomy of popular culture and an idea of its reciprocal or circular interaction with dominant or hegemonic culture. We shall come to see the inadequacy of this initial formulation, but it attests to the strength of Ginzburg's commitment to a conception of popular culture that, if not autonomous, is primordial or fundamental in the "cosmos" of Menocchio.

Let us begin with the argument that appears dominant in the principal text, at least until its concluding pages. It presents oral, popular, peasant culture as a very old, fundamentally pre-Christian phenomenon which the turmoil of the Reformation allowed to surface and to break through the crust of more visible cultural forms. Ginzburg shares this vision with Mikhail Bakhtin, and his innovation is to present it as the oral "code" that shapes Menocchio's reading of written texts. Here is one of Ginzburg's typical formulations of his view:

What did a cosmogony such as the one described by Menocchio—the primordial cheese from which the worm-angels are produced—have to do with the Reformation? How can one trace back to the Reformation statements such as those attributed to Menocchio by his fellow villagers: "everything that we see is God, and we are gods, " the sky, earth, sea, air, abyss, and hell, all is God"? Provisionally, it's best to attribute them to a substratum of peasant beliefs, perhaps centuries old, that were never wholly wiped out. By breaking the crust of religious unity, the Reformation indirectly caused these old beliefs to emerge; the Counter-Reformation, attempting to restore unity, brought them into the light of day in order to sweep them away.

On the basis of this hypothesis, then, Menocchio's radical statements will not be explained by tracing them to Anabaptism or, worse yet, to a generic 'Lutheranism.' Rather, we should ask if they don't belong within an autonomous current.
of peasant radicalism, which the upheaval of the Reformation had helped to bring forth, but which was much older. (pp. 2021)

In the course of the book, the attribution of Menocchio's "world view" to an oral popular culture or peasant radicalism (here explicitly termed "autonomous") becomes much more than an "hypothesis" in either the scientific or the ordinary sense. Scientifically, Ginzburg's interpretation (as he will acknowledge in the footnote we have yet to discuss) cannot be proved in accordance with standard criteria of verification and falsification. I would, however, accept the status of the view as an "hypothesis" in the more ordinary sense. It is quite plausible to argue that Menocchio's ideas had a significant relation to oral, popular traditions of indeterminate age. Still moot, however, would be the nature of the relationship between these oral traditions and other aspects or levels of culture. Equally moot would be their role in comparison with other factors and forces in Menocchio's reading of written texts and his interaction with other aspects of culture.

Part of the attraction of Bakhtin's conception of an age-old, popular, oral culture is the fact that despite his periodic invocations of a phonocentric metaphysic-he leaves its status relatively "hypothetical" (in the ordinary sense), does not routinize or place excessive "scientific" freight upon it, and uses it rhetorically to motivate often insightful interpretations.3 Ginzburg, however, demands more of the conception he adapts from Bakhtin, and he attempts to resolve moot issues in a particular direction. For him, an oral, popular, peasant culture, seen either as autonomous or at least as primordial and fundamental, is the key to Menocchio's readings and his "world view." All the metaphors Ginzburg employs assume the foundational status of oral culture in Menocchio's "cosmos." One has archaeological and arboreal metaphors, at times mixed to indicate the incontestably privileged status of oral, popular culture, for example, in a phrase such as "a deeply-rooted current of peasant radicalism brought to the surface by the Reformation" (p. 33). And in a note we are told that Ginzburg chooses the term "peasant radicalism" in line with "Marx's phrase, according to which radicalism 'grasps things at the roots,' an image that, after all, is singularly appropriate to the present context" (p. 143n). One also finds ocular metaphors: "More than the text, then, what is important is the key to his reading, a screen that he unconsciously placed between himself and the printed page: a filter that emphasized certain words while obscuring others, that stretched the meaning of a word, taking it out of context, that acted on Menocchio's memory and distorted the very words of the text. And this screen, this key to his reading, continually leads us back to a culture that is very different from the one expressed on the printed page-one based on an oral tradition" (p. 33).

Ginzburg's own obsessive metaphors lead us as his readers to his own strong investments in the idea of a primordial, oral, popular culture-investments that are metaphysical, literary, and methodological.

Metaphysically, Ginzburg elaborates the binary opposition between speech and writing in terms reminiscent of Claude Lévi-Strauss in a chapter entitled "A Writing Lesson" in Tristes Tropiques.4 In so doing, he indulges in a phonocentrism that makes a scapegoat of writing and represses in speech itself the characteristics projected exclusively onto writing. In Ginzburg's words:

He [Menocchio] had experienced in his person the historic leap of incalculable significance that separates the gesticulated, mumbled, shouted speech of oral culture from that of written culture, toneless and crystallized on the page. The first is almost an extension of the body, the second "a thing of the mind." The victory of written over oral culture has been, principally, a victory of the abstract over the empirical. In the


possibility of finding release from particular situations one has the 
root of the connection that has always indissolubly bound writing 
and power. . . . He understood that the written word, and the 
ability to master and to transmit written culture, were sources of 
power. . . . (p. 59)

Thus the authority of Menocchio's putative experience is 
invoked to authenticate the spoken word and to relegate writing to 
the suspect sphere of power—the resource of hegemonic or 
dominant culture. The general ruses involved in a phonocentric 
metaphysic, with its relation to a myth of lost origins, have been so 
thoroughly "deconstructed" by Jacques Derrida that it is 
superfluous to repeat that gesture here.5 (Ginzburg does mention 
Derrida in the preface to the Italian edition, but it is only to dismiss as "facile" and "nihilistic" his criticisms of Foucault's Histoire de 
da folie-criticisms which Ginzburg seems to have misunderstood.) 
Suffice it to note that power is not absent from the spoken word, as 
the oral performance of the inquisitors themselves would be 
ought authorization for his views in what he had read. "He had 
read only a few books and these largely by chance. He had chewed 
upon and squeezed meaning out of every word in these books. He 
pondered them for years; for years words and phrases had fer-
mented in his memory" (p. 45). The way Menocchio read might 
itself indicate that his choice of books was not as fortuitous as 
Ginzburg believes. He had, for example, special regard for a book 
that ill accords with the thesis of the primordiality of oral, peasant 
culture: the Bible, "a book different from all others because it 
contained an essential element provided by God" (p. 31). As we 
shall see, however, the point is not simply to reverse Ginzburg's 
emphasis and arrive at a picture of a piously bookish Menocchio; it 
is rather to question the cogency of simple reversals in general, 
whether in favor of popular, oral, peasant culture or in favor of 
high, written, hegemonic culture (an excessively simple 
opposition postulated, moreover, in series of terms that are not 
altogether coincident).

Ginzburg's own idea of the primordial importance of oral 
culture in Menocchio's reading and "cosmos" is reinforced by a 
structuralist methodology and a reliance on a particular literary 
form: the detective story. His narrative is itself strangely 
anecdotal and geometrical, projectively empathetic and 
reductively analytic, extremely fragmented (62 chapters for 128 
pages, some chapters only one or two paragraphs long) and overly 
unified in theme and thesis. The object of his quest is obviously a 
deep structure, and his notion of a privileged code, filter, or grid 
provides a 
convenient reductive device to make full, unified sense of 
Menocchio's recorded comments. A rather rigid structuralist meth 
odology might itself be seen as the "deep structure" of a "super-
ficially" diffuse and at times unstitched narrative. But, on another 
level, the format of the detective story itself assures that the 
"whodunit" will reveal a single agent: oral, popular culture. In-
deed the fateful convergence of metaphysical, methodological, 
and narrative assumptions on a fundamental idea of oral culture 
creates in the reader the sense that there is a rather blind 
transferential

5. See especially Of Grammatology, tran.; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1967; 
relationship between Ginzburg as interpreter and Menocchio as Ginzburg "reads" him-Menocchio who presumably read "as if he were searching for confirmation of ideas and convictions that were already firmly entrenched" (p. 36).

One may note, before inquiring further into the nature of oral, popular culture in Ginzburg's account, that a structuralist methodology has a paradoxical effect. Ginzburg rightly wants to oppose the prejudice that all ideas originally emanate from high culture or dominant classes-that they come from the "heads of monks and university professors, certainly not of millers and peasants" (p. 15 sn). (This prejudice is perhaps less to be opposed, since opposition invites simple reversal, than to be dismissed as patently ridiculous.) He wants to show the active nature of Menocchio's readings. Yet the emphasis upon oral culture as a privileged code that Menocchio unconsciously employed returns the miller to passivity on another level, and it reduces to mere superficiality his strong-mindedness and audacity. To the extent that Menocchio is a figure of popular culture, it also obscures the fact that there can be exceptions on the level of popular culture itself. In addition, it relies on a structural concept (or fixation) of the unconscious as a grid or filter that unifies experience. It thereby represses the more challenging and disconcerting "notion" of the unconscious as a paradoxical name for processes of repression, displacement, and condensation processes that bring to the fore the significance of the problem of the historian's own transferential relation to the past as well as the need to work through that relation in a critical and self-critical way. Yet it is this inevitable transferential relation that discloses in more specific terms how Menocchio is "very close to us: a man like ourselves, one of us" and how his story "implicitly poses a series of questions for our own culture and for us" (preface to the English edition, pp. xi-xii).

What is the nature of the oral, popular, peasant culture which I have repeatedly invoked but left rather mysterious? It must be confessed that its nature is also rather mysterious in _The Cheese and the Worms_. The diffuse narrative and anecdotal style facilitates the treatment of it in vague, piecemeal, and allusive terms. It is more often invoked than it is described or analyzed, and its clarity is in inverse relation to its putative explanatory power. This fact is perhaps in keeping with the metaphysical dimension of Ginzburg's account, wherein "popular culture" acquires traits usually associated with a "god-term." Matters are not helped when, toward the end of the book, Ginzburg appeals to Scolio's _Setteennario_ as embodying the somewhat elusive oral tradition, for, although the poem was written by "an unknown rustic," it includes elements of fundamentalist faith in the Ten Commandments, iconoclasm, desire for a plain style, praise of sobriety and piety, a frugal conception of a proper life, an other-worldly idea of utopia, dogmatic intolerance, anti-intellectualism, and an anticarnivalesque animus. (See pp. 1n-1lS.) The fact that the poem was written by "an unknown rustic" raises questions about the unity of popular, oral culture even when the latter is restricted to the peasantry, for that culture was not as homogeneous in its traditions and practices as Ginzburg's references to it suggest. It harbored inner differences and divisions as well as an internalization of aspects of dominant culture, notably Christianity. Ginzburg is of course not ignorant of this point, but it plays very little role in the story he tells. One crucial variant of it will, however, emerge with reference to the figure of Menocchio itself, especially in the light of considerations that are prominent in Ginzburg's concluding pages.

Four characteristics of oral, popular culture seem to emerge as especially significant in the comments dispersed in Ginzburg's account. First, there is a materialism expressed, for example, in Menocchio's cosmogony of cheese and worms and in his questioning of the doctrines of a creator God, the divinity of Christ, the immaculate conception, and the immortality of souls. Here, however, one may note that Menocchio, unlike Ginzburg, does not engage in the quest for a primordial or foundational level of explanation, either by giving priority to oral over written culture or by stipulating some single principle or entity as the first cause of the others. In his variations on the story of how the world was like
cheese from which angels and God himself emerged, he is quite flexible, even labile, in discussing the relations of chaos, God, and "the most holy majesty." At one point he argues that "aH was chaos... and out of that bulk a mass formed-just as cheese is made out of milk-and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels. The most holy majesty decreed that these should be God and the angels" (quoted, p. 53). Here chaos seems primary, and "the most holy majesty," distinguished from God, seems to have the role of an order-giving demiurge. In response to the vicar general's question about the nature of this most holy majesty, Menocchio says that he conceives him as "the spirit of God who was from eternity." Here the spirit of God is coeval with chaos and precedes God. In another version, however, Menocchio makes God eternal and exchanges positions between him and the holy spirit. In answer to the inquisitor's question, Menocchio reportedly answers: "I believe that they were always together, that they were never separated, that is, neither chaos without God, nor God without chaos" (quoted, p. 54). In the face of further inquisitorial questioning, Menocchio asserts that God is eternal with chaos but at first their union is only implicit- "he did not know himself nor was he alive, but later he became aware of himself and this is what I mean that he was made from chaos" (quoted, p. 54). Later in his own account, Ginzburg provides a misleading linear reduction of Menocchio's reported views: "Chaos preceded the 'most holy majesty,' which is not further defined; from chaos came the first living beings-the angels, and God himself who was the greatest among them-by spontaneous generation, 'produced by nature' " (p. 57). One might, by contrast, insist that there is value in Menocchio's more flexible formulations, especially with reference to our own secularized analogue of it: the quest for unified explanations or primordial levels in relation to forces that contest this quest. Ginzburg's own explanatory gestures in this regard may at times be close to the inquisitorial logic that he explicitly rejects.

A second feature of peasant culture is an egalitarianism combined with a view of existing society as divided between "supers" and "poor people" (p. 16). Menocchio saw ecclesiastical hierarchy as a principal embodiment of oppression because the church was still a large landholder. "Against this enormous edifice built on the exploitation of the poor, Menocchio set forth a very different religion, where aH members were equal because the spirit of God was in aH of them" (p. 17).

A third feature is tolerance in a positive sense related to the affirmation of "the equivalence of aH faiths, in the name of a simplified religion, free of dogmatic or confessional considerations" (p. 51). In Menocchio's reported words: "The majesty of God has given the Holy Spirit to aH, to Christians, to heretics, to Turks, to Jews; and he considers them aH dear, and they are aH saved in the same manner" (quoted, p. 51). Or again: "I believe that each person holds his faith to be right, but we do not know which is the right one" (quoted with emphasis added, p. 51).

Fourth, one has a this-worldly utopianism. "The image of a more just society was consciously projected onto a non-eschatological future. It wasn't the Son of Man high up in the clouds, but men like Menocchio-the peasants of Montereale whom he vainly tried to convince-who, through their struggles, would have to be the bearers of this 'new world'" (p. 86). It is curious that, despite Ginzburg's reliance on Bakhtin and his recognition that "the center of the culture portrayed by Bakhtin is the carnival" (preface to the Italian edition, p. xvi), Ginzburg himself does not elaborate on the actual role of carnival in Montereale or the significance of the fact that one of Menocchio's own occupations - as a guitar player at feasts - could be seen as carnivalesque. Nor does he stress the relation between carnival and utopia. In Bakhtin carnival is the realistic, this-worldly utopia that alternates in variable ways with workaday, "serious" practices, and it characterizes a mode of life in which it is legitimate to have both "serious" and "joking" relations to the same beliefs or institutions. Indeed for Bakhtin things are best when one can joke about what one holds most sacred.

An unavoidable question is whether "a few soundings confirm
the existence of traits reducible to a common peasant culture," as
ginzburg affirms (preface to the Italian edition, p. xxi). To what
extent are the four remarkable traits i have extracted from
Ginzburg's account unique to peasant culture, originally devel-
oped in peasant culture (where at times one even seems to have a
popular enlightenment avant la lettre), or especially prevalent in
peasant culture? Ginzburg does not provide answers to these ques-
tions, and he does not even formulate them in sufficiently distinct
and differentiated form. He would like to affirm the existence of an
age-old oral tradition that is the privileged repository of the traits
he sees and admires in Menocchio. But he nonetheless furnishes
evidence that in the sixteenth century, the peasants and villagers
whom Menocchio "vainly tried to convince" also harbored other
tendencies, indeed countercurrents. Not only does their testimony
at Menocchio's trials seem to indicate an assimilation of aspects of
dominant culture. There also seem to be tendencies in the peasant
ry that cannot be construed solely as mimetic derivatives or inter-
nalizations of the dominant culture, for example, a degree of
intolerance toward outsiders. Conversely, it may be argued that
the traits ascribed to oral, popular culture did have certain ana-
logues in Christianity, for example, the "materialistic" belief in the
resurrection of the body, the egalitarianism of evangelical
currents, and the propensity for other-worldly visions of a heavenly utopia
to shade into this-worldly protest. Most significantly, perhaps,
pre-Reformation Christianity had been relatively tolerant of het-
erodoxies, too tolerant for reformers who wanted a more rigorous
spirituality and might have found it difficult to distinguish betWeen
tolerance and abuse. There is a sense in which Menocchio seems,
among other things, to be pre-Reformation in his own expansive
understanding of Christianity.

These observations raise what is the larger and most pressing
question in a sufficiently discriminating way. Indeed he is
inhibited from so doing by his insistence upon the role of a
unified popular
culture as the key to Menocchio's "cosmos" and by his reliance on
the binary opposition betWeen dominant and popular culture. In
his retrospective preface written for the English edition, he denies
the charge that he ascribed "absolute autonomy" to peasant
culture and, appealing to Bakhtin, he affirms instead the existence of "circularity": "betWeen the culture of the dominant classes and
that of the subordinate classes there existed, in preindustrial Eu-
" betWeen the culture of the dominant classes and
that of the subordinate classes there existed, in preindustrial Eu-
rope, a circular relationship composed of reciprocal influences,
which traveled from low to high as well as from high to low.
(Exactly the opposite, therefore, of the 'concept of the absolute
autonomy and continuity of peasant culture' that has been at-
tributed to me—see notes pp. 154-155)' (p. xi). In the preface to the
original Italian edition, there is a somewhat similar remark which
also relies on a reference to Bakhtin: "Cultural dichotomy, then-
but also a circular, reciprocal influence betWeen the cultures of
subordinate and ruling classes that was especially intense in the
first half of the sixteenth century" (p. xvii). Yet we have seen that
in the principal body of the text, Ginzburg does refer to "an auto-
no mous current of peasant radicalism" (p. 21), and he invests a
great deal in the idea of a primordial substratum of peasant
beliefs. Toward the end of the principal text, he casts his views in
a longer-term historical perspective:

Such figures as Rabelais and Brueghel probably weren't excep-
tions. All the same, they closed an era characterized by hidden
but fruitful exchanges, moving in both directions betWeen high
and popular cultures. The subsequent period was marked, instead,
by an increasingly rigid distinction betWeen the culture of the
dominant classes and artisan and peasant cultures, as well as by
the indoctrination of the masses from above. We can place the
break betWeen these tWo periods in the second half of the
sixteenth century, basically coinciding with the intensification of
social differentiation under the impulse of the price revolution.
But the decisive crisis had occurred a few decades
before, with the Peasants' War and the reign of the Anabaptists in Münster. At that time, while maintaining and even emphasizing the distance between the classes, the necessity of recon
quering, ideologically as well as physically, the masses threat
en to break 100 se from every sort of control was dramatically brought home to the dominant classes. (p. 126)

This passage emphasizes the reciprocity or circularity of ex
changes in the early sixteenth century, and it sees a "break" in the
second half of the century. But it shifts its terms of comparison from the relation between "high and popular cultures" in the
earlier period to that between "the culture of the dominant classes
and artisan and peasant cultures" in the later one, as if "high" and
"dominant" were equivalent terms and as if peasants and artisans could be amalgamated at least in the later period. The terms and comparisons of the overall argument seem confused and contra
dictory: an autonomous or at least fundamental tradition of peas
ant culture is nonetheless in reciprocal or circular relations with a high (or at times dominant) culture in the early sixteenth century, and a break supervenes in the later sixteenth century. But how can a peasant culture be both autonomous (or at least primordial, fundamental, infrastructural-the key, filter, grid, and so forth) and involved in reciprocal or circular relations with a dominant culture? Even at the risk of becoming embroiled in tedious seman
tic exercises or, even worse, of repeating on Ginzburg's text a variant of inquisitorial logic, one would like a little more clarification.

The footnote on pages 154-55 -another retrospective addition to the text at once adds a glimmer of light and intensifies confusion. Ginzburg again denies the charge of "absolute autonomy" and affirms circular or reciprocal relations without trying to explicate the relations between (just plain?) autonomy (or at least primordiality) and reciprocity (allowing perhaps for oxymoronic "relative" autonomy). He does, however, make this rather surpris
ing concession: "It's legitimate to object that the hypothesis that traces Menocchio's ideas about the cosmos to a remote oral tradi
tion is also unproven-and perhaps destined to remain so . . . even if, as I've stated above, I intend in the future to demonstrate its possibility with addition al evidence." He then adds this rather astounding comment: "In any case, it would be advisable to develop new criteria of proof specifically suited to a line of research based on so thoroughly a heterogeneous, in fact unbalanced, documentation. That a new field of investigation alters not only the methods but the very criteria of proofs in a given discipline is shown, for example, in the history of physics: the acceptance of atomic theory has necessitated a change in the standards of evidence that had developed within the sphere of classical physics" (p. 155). I shall return shortly to the question of documentation. But the reference to altered criteria of proof is striking, and the reference to physics seems little more than diver-
sionary. In the text of The Cheese and the Worms, it is largely the force of metaphysical desire for a primordial, deep structure in history and in the explanatory efforts of the historian that impels contradictory movements in the argument, and the only alterations in the criteria of proof seem to be in the direction of a secular mythology that, especially in its unacknowledged forms, may have dubious professional implications. A reference to Freud's encoun
ter with the "primai crime" or Lévi-Strauss's admission that, at the limit, he too offers a myth-the myth of mythology-might have been more apposite.

Ginzburg's footnote does make explicit a consideration that, while periodically adumbrated, is not adequately explored in the body of the principal text: hegemony and its import for reciprocity in relations. As he observes, "dominant culture and subordinate culture are matched in an unequal struggle, where the dice are loaded" (p. 15 sn). One effect of Ginzburg's stress on oral, popular culture as well as of his narrative technique in the principal text is that hegemonic or dominant culture remains a largely residual category, even an image of the radically "other." It is clear enough that the inquisitor can condemn Menocchio to the stake for heresy but that Menocchio cannot punish the inquisitor for intolerant
dogmatism and rigid orthodoxy. But we learn little about those who persecute Menocchio or about the relations between religious and secular authorities in a hegemonic structure. Here Ginzburg's empathy with the oppressed induces a piecemeal, evanescent perception of the oppressors, whose own problems, anxieties, and motivations remain covered by a veil of silence.

With reference to the issue of hegemonic culture, one may introduce the problem of documentation in a sense somewhat different from Ginzburg's own. An inquisition register is, as Ginzburg observes, part of the "archives of the repression." He sadly notes in the preface to the Italian edition that the bulk of the evidence we have on popular culture comes from such repositories of hegemonic culture and that the reconstruction of popular beliefs and practices must be inferential and indirect. But his own reflections seem to stop at this point, and his only concern seems to be to find new ways of making inferences about a "reality" he is tempted to construe in metaphysical and mythological terms. In the principal text, the story-line and the analytic format are well in place before there are indications that he is basing them on inquisition registers, and the fact that he is never becomes problematic.

And, despite his insistence on the opposition between the oral and the written when it is construed in terms of a questionable metaphysics, he does not address the difficulty posed by the more specific problem of the written inscription of oral testimony by notaries of the inquisition. Nor does he recognize the significance of what might ironically be called la question préalable—the need for a close, critical reading of documents such as inquisition registers before they are used as quarries for facts and sources for inferential reconstructions of "reality." For these documents are themselves historical realities that do not simply represent but also supplement the realities to which they refer, and a critical reading of them may provide insight into cultural processes-insight of a son that at least resists mythologizing desires. For one thing, an inquisition register is a pan of a discursive context that embodies hegemonic relations, and a close study of the nature of questions and answers may provide concrete understanding of the interplay between
these provide a realistic context for appreciating the more or less exceptional or widespread nature of resistance itself. Indeed the historian must be alert to the possibility of tensions and contradictions within as well as between levels of culture, including popular culture. Ginzburg criticizes the history of mentalities for its "insistence on the inert, obscure, unconscious elements in a given world view" and for "its decidedly classless character" (p. xxiii). But not only does he threaten to replicate on another level its insistence on a structural unconscious; he also tends to displace its assumption of cultural unity from society as a whole to relations within a class or a level of culture.

Hegemonic culture itself is not a homogeneous whole; it varies over time, and the very fissures or uncertainties in it at any given time may provide spaces in which resistance can manifest itself. In certain periods, it may even be difficult to discern what is hegemonic or orthodox. The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation did through conflict heighten unity within opposed groups, and there may have been "an increasingly rigid distinction between the culture of the dominant classes and artisan and peasant cultures" (p. 126). But the sixteenth century in general was a time when hegemony itself was at issue, and lines of communication were not entirely broken, notably (as Ginzburg notes) between segments of popular and high culture. The pre-Reformation Church could afford to be relatively tolerant insofar as challenges to it were not crystallized in large-scale, organized movements and alternative institutions. With the coming of the Reformation, the crust was not simply broken in ways that allowed heterodoxies to emerge. As in the first centuries of Christianity, the very nature of orthodoxy had to be defined (or redefined), and the scope of the challenges both from Protestants of various confessions and from more or less non-Christian heterodoxies (as well as from diverse amalgams) helped generate anxiety and doctri-11atic intolerance. The Catholic Church itself displayed some of the more spiritually "rigorous" traits of its Reformed critics-including their "seriousness" and anticarnivalesque impetus-not simply to do more effective battle with them but also because of the internally per

suasive features of the newer ways. There is a significant exchange between Menocchio and the inquisitor in this respect. In answer to one of the recurrent questions concerning his discussions with others about articles of faith, Menocchio responds that he had spoken "jokingly with some about the articles of the faith." The inquisitor counters: "How is it that you were joking about matters of the faith? Is it proper to joke about the faith?" (quoted, p. 104).

From a different, in certain respects an older, perspective, what is unfortunate is that these questions could be reduced to the fatuous level of rhetorical indignation. Yet, as Ginzburg indicates, the inquisitors themselves might at certain junctures be uncertain about belief or procedure, and this uncertainty allowed at least a tiny room for Menocchio's initiatives.

If there were more truly reciprocal relations among levels of culture that seem to have continued throughout the sixteenth century, they took place between segments of popular and high culture. Here, moreover, dominant and high culture cannot simply be equated. In one obvious sense, dominant or hegemonic culture may be seen as a form of high culture. And aspects of high culture (in the sense of works of a cultural elite) may reinforce hegemonic culture. But high culture may itself harbor forces of resistance and criticism that are most effective socially when they connect with aspects of popular culture. If Frances Yates is right, heterodox tendencies were at times quite prevalent, perhaps even "dominant," in cultural elites in the course of the sixteenth century. And, as Ginzburg himself repeatedly notes, there were at least convergences between Menocchio's views and those advanced in the most "progressive" circles of high culture, particularly among humanistic "heretics."

At this point, one may return to the complex figure of Menocchio and the question of what that figure may tell us about the interaction of levels or aspects of culture at his time and over time. In his preface to the Italian edition, Ginzburg asserts that "even a limited case (and Menocchio certainly is this) can be representa

tive" (p. xxi). But in what precise sense is he the representative bearer or exemplar of oral, popular, peasant culture? In some sense—but how precise about it can one be?—Menocchio is "representative." But he is also other than representative. He is exceptional, not a "typical peasant" (p. xx)—not even (if you will excuse an atrocious pun) a run-of-the-mill miller. He seems exceptional in the way he articulates common beliefs and exceptional in his resistance to pressures both in his village community and in his inquisitorial trials. He is perhaps even exceptional in his own variant of metaphysical desire, in his "uncontrollable yearning 'to seek exalted things' "—a yearning that "tormented him" (p. 110). Even as an isolated old man beset with bitter irony, he was not entirely broken. This too seems rather exceptional.

But even in a more obviously sociocultural sense, there is something exceptional ("individual" might be a better word) about Menocchio, and this status—largely repressed throughout Ginzburg's text—seems to emerge forcefully in the concluding pages. I would suggest that Menocchio was "representative" and "exceptional" in the peculiar sense of being a liminal figure—a position that suited him for the role of scapegoat before the inquisition. His position was liminal between popular and elite as well as between oral and written culture. The idea that oral culture was Menocchio's primary grid seems particularly suspect in light of the way Menocchio was divided between the "world" of oral culture and that of the books that meant so much to him. Indeed the case of the other miller (Pighino) who was tried by the inquisition—a case Ginzburg introduces in good part to underwrite Menocchio's "representativeness"—also serves to stress his liminality. Pighino, while in certain ways a less impressive figure than Menocchio, may actually have attended readings of the famous heretic Paolo Ricci, better known as Camillo Renato (and also going by the humanistic name of Lisia Fileno). (See page 122.) Mere there would be an actual discursive context linking segments of popular culture with heterodox segments of high culture. Even more strikingly, Ginzburg notes that Menocchio's trial in 1599 almost coincided with that of Giordano Bruno—a near coincidence that symbolize the twofold battle being fought against both high and low in this period of the Catholic hierarchy" (p. 127).

Yet Menocchio is also in certain respects situated at the threshold between popular and dominant culture. He very much wanted to enter into an exchange with the "higher-ups" and at times this desire fueled his impudence. In Ginzburg's words, Menocchio "felt the need to acquire the inherited knowledge of his adversaries, the inquisitors. In the case of Menocchio, in short, we perceive a free and aggressive spirit intent on squaring things with the culture of the dominant classes" (p. 118). This need, I would add, seems very modern, for it is one that confronts critics today on all levels of culture.

The complexity of this figure of resistance does not, however, stop here. Menocchio was in fact someone who had many social roles on the level of popular culture itself, prominently including those of peasant and miller. He tilled the land yet he dressed in the traditional white garb of the miller. Toward the end of his book, Ginzburg introduces considerations that indicate both the existence of certain tensions in the popular classes and the special status of millers in popular culture:

The age-old hostility between peasants and millers had solidified an image of the miller—shrewd, thieving, cheating, destined by definition for the fires of hell. . . . The charge of heresy was wholly consistent with a stereotype such as this. Contributing to it was the fact that the mill was a place of meeting, of social relations, in a world that was predominantly closed and staid. Like the inn and the shop it was a place for the exchange of ideas. . . . Their working conditions made millers—like innkeepers, tavern keepers, and itinerant artisans—an occupational group especially receptive to new ideas and inclined to propagate them. Moreover, mills, generally located on the peripheries of settled areas and far from prying eyes, were well suited to shelter clandestine gatherings. (pp. 119-20)

So we have Menocchio—miller, peasant, and guitar player at feasts—resisting hegemonic culture yet wanting to engage it in controversy, having a deep interest in certain books, and transmit
ting oral culture that is linked to certain heterodox aspects of high culture. Could he also be called a proto-intellectual, an early version of what Gramsci was to call the "organic" intellectual, one coming from the popular classes yet able to engage hegemonic and high culture in the interest of the oppressed? Perhaps. Ginzburg indicates how Menocchio confronted a problem that has become familiar in the modern period: that of addressing a split audience. He presented a simplified, exoteric view of his ideas to the ignorant villagers: "If I could speak I would, but I do not want to speak." The more complex, esoteric view, instead, was reserved for the religious and secular authorities whom he so eagerly wished to address: "I said," he informed his judges at Portogruaro, "that if I had permission to go before the pope, or a king, or a prince who would listen to me, I would have a lot of things to say; and if he had me killed afterwards, I would not care." (pp. 65-66)

Whatever may have been the case in Menocchio's time, later periods were to manifest exacerbated forms of this problem, and intellectuals might turn away from the need to speak in two voices, as popular culture itself seemed beleaguered if not effaced, and newer modes of cultural dominance took shape. Even the appropriation of older popular traditions in high culture might take esoteric or hermetic forms that made them inaccessible to a wider audience. And, as Ginzburg remarks in a footnote, the modern period added another dimension of culture, mass or commodified culture—something that did not yet exist in the sixteenth century, at least in anything approximating its modern form (p. 130n). Commodified culture affects all other levels of culture and has complex relations to hegemonic culture in general and official state culture in particular. The extent to which it has assimilated popular culture itself as well as the extent to which it is punctuated by forces of criticism and resistance is an intricate story whose recounting would take us too far afield.

Still, Menocchio's proximity to us, "a man like ourselves, one of us," a man whose story "implicitly poses a series of questions for our own culture and for us" (p. xii), is a many-sided issue. What I would stress in conclusion is the bearing of the transversal dimension of research on the historical profession itself. In academies we have, in our own small way, witnessed the emergence of various heterodoxies, and we are at a point where the very definition of orthodoxy is in question. As always, there is a significant relation between intellectual and institutional matters. To see Menocchio predominantly as the bearer of an oral, popular culture that is given a privileged status in interpretation easily functions to reinforce hegemonic relations in professional historiography. If a certain level of culture represents primordial reality, then it is a very short step to the assumption that those who study it are the "real" historians, those who focus on the most important things. One could easily gather oral and written evidence to support the contention that a number of historians have taken this step. The result is a bizarre and vicious paradox whereby a vicarious relation to the oppressed of the past serves as a pretext for contemporary pretensions to dominance. A different understanding of problems may further a more accurate account of the interaction among aspects of culture in the past as well as a constructive conception of their desirable relations in the present, both within the historical profession and beyond it. 7

7. Praise for The Cheese and the Worms has been high, but the reception of the book among specialists has not been devoid of critical response. For the most extensive critical analysis of it, which in limited ways converges with the argument in this essay, see Paola Zambelli, "Uno, due, tre, mille Menocchio?" Archivio storico italiano 137 (1979): 51-90. This is the critique to which Ginzburg tries to reply in the long footnote to the English edition (pp. 154-55) which I have discussed. See also the reservations in the reviews of Samuel Cohn Jr., Journal of Interdisciplinary History 12. (1982): 52.3-2.5; Erik H. C. Mideiforl, Catholic Historical Review 68 (1982): 513-14; and Valerio Valeri, Journal of Modern History 54 (1982): 139-43. Although it appeared before the publication of The Cheese and the Worms, Anne Jacobson Schutte's "Carlo Ginzburg" Uournal of Modem History 48 (1976): 296-315 contains some observations that are pertinent to its argument. Schutte stresses the role of Ginzburg's obvious animus against the Catholic Church and in favor of "pagan" culture. I have chosen to emphasize the somewhat less apparent bearing of Ginzburg's approach upon the historical profession itself. Schutte also raises some probing questions about the limitations of Ginzburg's use of inquisition registers as sources.