

COLERIDGE, EXOTICISM AND EMPIRE

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COMPTE-RENDU

Carlo Ginzburg at the Maison Française: Close-ups on Microhistory and Literature

Carlo Ginzburg is a pioneer of microhistory. Currently teaching at the Scuola Normale of Pisa, he has produced ground-breaking work on the theory of historiography, art history and literary studies, ranging from the Italian Renaissance to Early Modern European History. Chair Duncan Wu, Fellow of St Catherine's College, launched the conference by announcing that Ginzburg's talk, entitled "Coleridge, Exoticism and Empire", would be only an apparent departure from his usual areas of exploration. In a challenging presentation, Ginzburg rethought the concept of human agency as a key link between history and literature.

Microhistory Today

Ginzburg gave an informal talk earlier in the day, as part of a round table on microhistorical approaches. He started off by emphasising his joint interest in theory and empirical data and thereby underlined that *microstoria* was not merely a useful theoretical label for him. He consequently outlined two scenarios in order to envision the present state of the topic. A first possibility, which was expressed by Eduardo Grendi in 1993, was to consider it finished as a project. Ginzburg did not support this view, as it rests on the alleged inability of microhistory to face a split between its two different versions, social science and cultural history. Unconvinced by this distinction, Ginzburg put forward a second scenario: microhistory is still alive today; one has therefore to examine its present modalities.

Thus, it is worth analysing the geography of microhistory. The "intensive gaze", as he called it, has had a varying impact in various countries. Besides, the geography of the topic can have political implications. For instance, the fact of granting significance to an Icelandic tribe subversively questions the hierarchy between centre and periphery.

Microhistory, thereby defined as a plural configuration, can be represented as "a house with many mansions". For Ginzburg, it is part of an even greater dialogue between different fields, including literary criticism. Referring to literary critics such as Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, he drew a parallel between the process of looking at texts in an intensive way and his own study of inquisitional trials.

Ginzburg then moved to the question of distance between the historian and his object. Picking up on Kenneth Pike's distinction between the emic and the etic, that is, in his words, between the "actors' idiom" and the scientific "distance from the actors", he expressed his wish to rescue the emic from a positivistic attitude. Instead of thinking those two perspectives as mutually exclusive, one should rethink them as part of an interaction.

The issue of distance was further developed against the grain of a common assumption, which consists in considering microhistory as a privileged gaze on small, marginal objects. For Ginzburg, the nature of microhistory lies in the microscope, not in the allegedly microscopical nature of its object. His conclusive image, drawing on Siegfried Kracauer, was that of a cinematographic close-up, understood as a metaphor for both the production and the reception of microhistory.

Coleridge and the Question of Agency

The talk Ginzburg gave after this round table moved to a different period and a different approach, but foregrounded the concept of agency as a common ground to envisage both historical action and poetic creation. Ginzburg took Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a case study to test this notion. After defining agency in relation to the political thought of the social historian E. P. Thompson, he diverged from his critical assessment of Coleridge in *The Romantics, England in a Revolutionary Age* (1997). He then placed the notion of agency at the core of his own reading of Coleridge, by relating it to the critical categories used by the poet himself in his *Biographia Literaria* as well as to E. P. Thompson's concept and its discussion by the Marxist historian Perry Anderson. Ginzburg thereby recuperated Thompson's political understanding of agency as a fruitful "model for agency in the broader sense".

Agency is a double-edged concept. Its ambivalence rests on an interaction between two opposite dimensions: action and conditioning. Thus, the agent stands as an “active initiator” as well as a “passive instrument”. In *The Poverty of Theory* (1978), E. P. Thompson highlighted “the crucial ambivalence of our human presence in our own history, part-subjects, part-objects, the voluntary agents of our own involuntary determinations”. Ginzburg’s aim was to extend the theoretical possibilities carried by Thompson’s political concept. Rephrased in terms of free will and determinism, this notion offers a way of understanding the theological debate which reached its peak in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. It is also a way of thinking human action beyond the discourse of postmodernism. According to Ginzburg, the emphasis on human agency implies a move away from poststructuralism and postmodernism. As he reiterated his defence of a “pragmatic” rather than linguistic turn, he referred in particular to a collection of articles, *History and Theory, Agency after Postmodernism* (2001).

After defining this concept, Ginzburg produced a political reading of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, leading him to associate the figure of Coleridge with a passive kind of agency. For him, this type of agency takes shape in the poet’s distinctive “rhetoric of guilt”, embodied in the killing of the albatross. He argued that the killing of the albatross, which should not be subject to any psychoanalytical interpretation, was a guilt-charged representation of the imperialistic enterprise. The poetic text thereby “points at the world out there”, but it does so *via* an earlier text, Shelvocke’s *A Voyage round the World by Way of the Great South Sea* (1723), which is said to be a possible source for the poem. Ginzburg explained how the *Voyage*’s rhetoric of innocence transformed into a rhetoric of guilt in Coleridge’s poem. While opposing the idea that the world could be understood as a text, he asserted the text’s ability to point both to the real world and to other texts. In Coleridge’s case, this process of reference connotes passivity. A “textual and extra-textual conditioning” bounds him to the imperialistic reality as mediated by Shelvocke.

Ginzburg concluded his talk by quoting two key images from Coleridge’s work. The first one, taken from his notebook (November 1790), was that of a flight of starlings without volition. The second one, taken from the seventh chapter of his *Biographia Literaria*, brought out a critical argument about imagination, identified as an active and passive faculty:

“Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets [...]; and will have noticed how the little animal wins its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it [...]. This is no unapt emblem of the mind’s self-experience in the act of thinking. There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive. In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the IMAGINATION.”

Coleridge, however, may not be Ginzburg’s last word on the question of agency. He ultimately hinted at an opposite figure of poetic agency, on the side of control – the case of Dante.