

## **An Appraisal Of Ginzburg’s Historicism: Problems And Perspectives.(An Analysis Based Upon His Essays In ‘Clues, Myths And Historical Method’)**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The history of historical interpretations has witnessed major transformations. With such transformations historians also have equipped themselves with new methods and tools. Ginzburg’s writings aptly exemplify major shift in the history writing processes in modern world. Ginzburg’s growing up in an environment in which books and ideas, however, is no doubt at least partly responsible for his exceptional methodologies of history writing.*

**KEYWORDS:** *generation, interpretation, personality, popular culture, radical, historical*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

History is not information that is handed down unchanged from generation to generation. Historiography, the history of historical interpretation, has witnessed major transformation. Such transformation and changes in historical interpretation definitely show to us how with new evidences or fresh interpretation of existing evidence, a new understanding of past can be achieved. From a discipline, mainly concerned with ‘affairs of state’ or ‘deeds of King’, history has moved where the common women and men are the subject of enquiry. The content of history, during earlier period, was restricted primarily to battle and treaties, the personalities and politics of statesmen, the law and decrees of rulers. But important as such data are, they by no means constitute the ‘total’ or ‘whole’ substance of history. Especially, within last few decades historians have come to recognize that history comprises a record of past human activities in every sphere, not just political developments.

Women as well as men, the ruled as well as rulers, the poor as well as rich are the part of history. So too are the social and economic institutions that women and men have created and that in turn have shaped their lives, family and social class. Ideas and attitude too, not just of intellectuals but also of ‘the people’- whose life may have been virtually remain untouched by ‘great books’, are all parts of the historical concern. As historians have extended the compass to their work, they have also equipped themselves with new methods and tools. For example, to understand the motives of the man and women, who have made history, they draw on the insight of Social Psychologists and Cultural Anthropology. Similarly, to illuminate the lives of the ‘poor’ and of those who have left few written records, historians look for other cultural remains like folk song for example. Historians even have tried to examine the past, so far as possible, through the eyes and with the mind of those who lived in the past. However, it is also essential to realize that there can never be an exact picture of what happened in the past. The task of historian is to bring us as closed as possible to such a picture. In order to realize this goal, one of the major developments that took place in the interpretation of cultural history is its amalgamation with other disciplinary subjects like sociology and anthropology. Therefore, historiographical changes incorporates new evidences and new ways of looking at existing evidences and the inclusion of perspectives from other human sciences such as, Social Psychology, Cultural Anthropology, Environmental Studies, Study of Oral Traditions, Linguistic Study, led to some important reformulation in explaining the past, resulting primarily from asking different questions from the sources than had been asked before. Given this historiographical background, in limited sence, we may look upon the work of Carlo Ginzburg. Best known for his two classic studies of the confrontation between traditional agrarian beliefs and the Inquisition of the Counter Reformation, Carlo Ginzburg has also written a number of challenging methodological essays that is collected together in an Italian edition, now beautifully translated by John and Ann C. Tedeschi. However, before reading this work, it is very crucial to look into the author’s background and his cultural and ideological mooring. Ginzburg was born in 1939 in Turin, where his father, Leone Ginzburg, taught Russian literature and helped to found the publishing firm of Einaudi. Natalia Ginzburg, the historian's mother, who had already begun to publish short stories before he was born, is now one of Italy's most highly regarded novelists and essayists.

As a consequence of his father's anti-Fascist activities, the family spent three years in 'confinement' in a village in the Abruzzi, moving to Rome in 1943. In November of that year, Leone Ginzburg was arrested by the Germans. Three months later he died in the Regina Coeli prison after being tortured. Following this traumatic early childhood, Ginzburg was reared in Turin, Rome, and London in the intellectual circles to which his mother and stepfather (Gabriele Baldini, a professor of English literature, who died in 1969) belonged. He was trained as a historian at the prestigious Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, where one of his teachers was Delio Cantimori. After serving as assistant in modern history at the University of Rome, in 1970 he took up his present appointment, *professore incaricato* in modern history at the University of Bologna. As well as holding fellowships at the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence and at the Warburg Institute in London. Ginzburg's growing up in an environment in which books and ideas (as well as liberal political commitments) were taken seriously, however, is no doubt at least partly responsible for his exceptionally rapid development as a historian. In one important way, however, Ginzburg differs from the majority of his European peers. He studied under Cantimori; and much of his work has been in Cantimori's favorite territory, the study of sixteenth-century Italian religious radicals. Nevertheless, unlike all too many historians, he has not submitted to the psychological pressures of filial piety or the imperatives of academic gamesmanship by becoming a pale epigone of his *Doktorvater*. In part, perhaps, because of Cantimori's premature death but mainly because Ginzburg's upbringing provided him with a degree of intellectual assurance and a breadth of contacts in academic and literary spheres that most young historians lack, he has not confined himself to a more detailed mapping of the area that Cantimori was the first to explore. Not only does Ginzburg exhibit the broad interests and openness to alternative approaches that characterized Cantimori's work; he has gone beyond them, exercising a notable degree of independence in his choices of subjects and methodologies.

Ginzburg's primary focus has been on the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in Italy. His research falls into four categories: the study of religious radicals, investigations of witchcraft, explorations in iconography, and discussions of historiography. Although the bulk of his publications is in the first two areas, it may be useful to look first at those in the other two, so that his major philosophical and methodological assumptions may be highlighted. Several aspects of Bloch's work appeal to him and appear to have influenced the directions in which he has moved. First, he is impressed by Bloch's resolution of fundamental problems faced by the historian, notably the assertion that philological expertise and systematic critical and analytical thinking make history a real "science", in spite of the fact that historians cannot replicate in the laboratory the events that they study.

The goal of this 'micro-historical' method is to develop a proper science of the individual case, a science that is best nourished by philology. For example, he begins "The High and the Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" with an exegesis of Romans 11: 20 and goes on to show how a pervasive misreading of the passage, especially in emblem books, justified the idea that too much knowledge is dangerous. In "Titian, Ovid, and Sixteenth-Century Codes for Erotic Illustration", he argues that what Erwin Panofsky insisted were arcane philosophical allegories creatively elaborated by the artist were, in fact, ideas derived from vernacular translations of *The Metamorphoses* and from crude illustrations by earlier artists. Moreover, contemporaries understood Titian's images as intentionally erotic rather than esoteric. Ginzburg reinterpreted these visual images by paying careful attention to several different cultural levels, thereby showing how the availability of printed books and engravings began to blur the distinctions between high and low culture. On a theoretical level Ginzburg's work in art history is connected to his fascination with the mythology of witchcraft. Both endeavors face a methodological dilemma when similarities appear between one painting or myth and another. These similarities might be analyzed in the purely formal terms of typology, in historical ones that identify avenues of transmission and influence or in some combination of the two. The desire to merge typology with history has guided members of the Warburg Institute, where Ginzburg spent some time in the early 1960s, and his essay, "From Aby Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method", outlines how Gombrich avoided the circular arguments of his predecessors and colleagues by considering images as forms of communication. In "Germanic Mythology and Nazism: Thoughts on an Old Book by Georges Dumézil" and "Freud, the Wolf-Man, and the Werewolves", Ginzburg suggests how certain beliefs might have been historically transmitted, thus resolving some of the ideological and logical problems created by Dumézil's and Freud's formal analyses of myths and dreams. Ginzburg is known internationally for his studies of what might be called the interface between learned and popular cultures. This collection of eight essays explores the methodological foundations of his historical analysis. He was among the first, if not the first, to recognize that early modern witchcraft trials had unique importance for the study of popular cultures. In Italy alone, the archives of the Inquisition have preserved the minutes of such trials by the thousands. Ginzburg's interest was not in formal heterodoxy or orthodoxy, and not even in the social phenomenon of persecution, but in the dialogue that the trial accounts often recorded between the accused witches or warlocks and their learned

oppressors. The best of these texts (those that allow the accused to speak) he now calls “dialogous”, for they record a dialogue and debate between the learned and the unlearned, and even between the rational and the irrational. But even if historians can catch the voices of the illiterate, what can they make of the mythical fragments that those voices are likely to relate? Are such fragments usable ‘clues’ in reconstructing entire mythical systems? Can those systems in turn be related to similar myths elsewhere? Can they tell us their history? The interpretation of cryptic allusions to mythical systems raises the issue of ‘clues’, that is, any kind of fragment, not necessarily verbal, that points to a larger reality at present invisible to observers. The first problem, that of reading a popular culture through records generated and dominated by the learned, is central to the science of anthropology. The second, inferences from seemingly superficial details that yield otherwise unrecorded information, is most akin to the work of art history. In his books Ginzburg has often used the methods of both anthropologists and art historians. These two problems, that of reading and that of inferring are, if not the overarching themes, at least the points of departure for most of the essays in this book. Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method touch upon a nearly bewildering variety of topics. They constitute an obviously partial but still informative intellectual autobiography. Ginzburg has never been reluctant to wrestle with intellectual problems in public and in print. He frequently expresses reservations about his own work or doubts that his methods will work. He even wonders whether readers will find any linkages at all between the essays. Among the themes he treats are a witchcraft trial at Modena in 1519; the methods of art history espoused by prominent members of the Warburg Institute; “high” (that is, “forbidden”) knowledge and codes for erotic illustrations in early modern tracts; and “clues”, in which the methods of Sherlock Holmes figure prominently. He further notes that Sigmund Freud failed to recognize striking similarities between the dreams of a patient (the “wolf-man”) with the ancient myth of werewolves. The essays are far-ranging, rich, and provocative. Ginzburg remains convinced that, in spite of enormous difficulties, dialogues texts can give us knowledge of popular cultures. The situation of the inquisitorial judges, seeking to understand the accused, is not so very different from that of modern anthropologists, and their records ought not to be dismissed as hopelessly distorted. Ginzburg believes that historians not only can, but must, argue from ‘clues’ to hidden realities. More problematic is his apparent faith in formal or morphological comparisons of tales, myths, or other cultural artifacts, which prescind from chronological or even geographical connections. Historians, he seems to be saying, need to inspect their records and to think in “achronic” terms. This dismissal of chronological context is an obvious challenge to traditional historical method. Can there be a timeless history? Whether there is merit in this part of his argument remains to be judged. Ginzburg’s own study on the witch’s sabbat, not yet seen by me, may help fashion an answer.

Carlo Ginzburg offers us an extraordinary array of essays written over the past thirty years. Subjects range from a Modenese witchcraft trial from 1519 to the studies of mythology by Georges Dumézil, from erotic illustration in the sixteenth century to the folkloric roots of the dream of Freud’s Wolf-Man. The essay on the epistemological history of the so-called Warburg School offers a cautionary tale. Ginzburg shows how the sequence of writers, from Warburg through Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky to Gombrich, found themselves navigating difficult epistemological waters. They were tempted to move from very fine and highly empirical readings of the contents of paintings toward much broader speculations about culture and history, all the while arguing and agonizing over the potential elliptical fallacies in that endeavor. His essay shows the pitfalls of moving from the highly empirical effort of reading the contents of visual objects to the historical and morphological efforts to link those contents to deeper structures in cultural space and time. In the essay on “Clues”, Ginzburg takes us on a breathtaking journey, as he was among the first to see that an important revolution in Western thought was achieved in the last hundred years by various techniques of pursuing wide conclusions from telltale details. He finds a fascinating family relationship in the work of persons as varied as Giovanni Morelli, Sigmund Freud, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and F. Gaulton (one of the founders of the technique of fingerprinting). As a historian, Ginzburg places himself in those streams of thought, relying on what he calls the “divinatory paradigm”, which lures the investigator from the small detail to the wider speculations on deeper structures, what he calls the “generalizing paradigm” or “morphology” (p. 113). In writing these histories, he is therefore writing his intellectual autobiography. Exploring the dilemmas of these methods, he also agonizes about his own approach, which rests on the intuitive faith that, as he quotes Warburg, “God is in the detail” (p. 96). At the same time, at many junctures he is honest enough to wonder if there is a God to be found. While these essays present many different resolutions, Ginzburg clearly rejects the dominance of the Galilean paradigm for the “human sciences”, saying that it leaves us in the “unpleasant dilemma” of assuming a “lax scientific system in order to obtain noteworthy results” or “a meticulous, scientific one to achieve results of scant significance” (p. 124). The only way out, he finds, is a system that relies to some extent on “instinct, insight, intuition”, by which he means a process not unlike some eighteenth-century definitions of genius, that is, “the lightning recapitulation of rational processes” (pp. 124-25). He finds no absolute certainty. The historian must make common cause with, among others, the hunter, the detective, the anthropologist, the

aphorist, the physiognomist, and, perhaps most provocatively, the inquisitor, all the while recognizing “the perpetual inadequacies of our analytical categories” (p. 155). In sum, these are essays that will delight anyone with a taste for erudition combined with a highly disciplined, but inevitably tenuous, movement from detail to broad speculation. Each essay has a specific subject, but gathered together, the collection is clearly about the epistemological dilemmas of doing history in a self-conscious and self-doubting age; it in turn provides clues for future histories about the history we now read. One of the central questions faced from the beginning by eminent members of the “Warburg school”, Ginzburg maintains, is how works of art may be used as historical sources. Warburg, who was strongly opposed to the efforts of Wolfflin and others to construct an “autonomous” history of art, believed that it was essential to show how artistic creations functioned in the life of a society. The device adopted by Warburg in his few published works was the Nietzschean concept of *Palthosformeln* (formulas for expressing intensified physical or psychological movement). One of his successors, Fritz Saxl, employed a tool that was more precise and had wider applications, the decoding procedure known as iconography. This technique produced impressive results when used on works of art possessing symbolic content that could be elucidated by reference to written sources; it led into a vicious circle, however, when Saxl tried to posit a causal relationship between works of art that did not contain hidden meanings derived from literary materials with the undocumentable inner feelings of the artists who produced them. Saxl’s contemporary Erwin Panofsky maintained that the art historian’s most important contributions were to be made on what he called the “iconological” level, where “the involuntary and unconscious self-revelation of (the artist’s) fundamental attitude toward the world” could be shown to be a manifestation of attitudes pervading an entire historical milieu. Although he was convinced that “synthetic intuition” into the artist’s unconscious could produce reliable insights of this kind, Panofsky was aware of the risks that this approach entailed and retreated in most of his work to the firmer but more limited ground of iconography. The unsolved problem of finding an acceptable scholarly method of relating works of art to other phenomena of the environment in which they were produced has been tackled once again by the present head of the Warburg Institute, E. H. Gombrich. Ginzburg shows that Gombrich’s initial reaction to the difficulty was complete skepticism about the possibility of doing anything more than noting coincidental parallels between internal aspects of artworks and contemporaneous external factors. Gradually, however, Gombrich has developed a new conceptual approach’,

in which he pays closer attention to artistic styles than did his predecessors, who concentrated on content. Styles, he insists, are not clear and direct testimonies of non artistic historical situations. Any artist’s style is influenced almost exclusively by the work of earlier artists, which imparts to him a “schema” or paradigm together with the visual vocabulary needed to translate his perceptions into images; his contemporaries understand his work because they too are familiar with the schema. Thus far, Gombrich is operating on an “internalist” plane. When, however, he attempts to account for shifts in style, he begins to provide an answer to the larger question. An artist working within a schema is posing for himself a limited number of problems, to which there are a determinate number of acceptable artistic solutions. He does so, Gombrich maintains, because at that point his society is demanding that art perform a particular “function”. But when society’s “requirements” change, the function of art and the ways in which the artist endeavors to fulfill that function shift also. Both the artist and his public are now operating out of a new “mental set”. Here, according to Ginzburg, is a most promising approach to the methodological question with which members of the “Warburg school” have been grappling. Yet Gombrich has not provided a completely satisfactory answer to the question, for it remains to be shown what means the scholar can employ to discover how and why this new mental set emerged in a society and was impressed upon its artists. Ginzburg’s study of the successive attempts by art historians to find solutions to a fundamental historical problem is an extremely impressive piece of work. This approach, as Ginzburg shows through his treatment of several examples, has at least two advantages. It enables scholars to learn more about both the verbal and the visual components of the emblems, which were transmitted from one book to another, changing in appearance and meaning as they went. There is comparatively little danger of engaging in circular argumentation or making farfetched, implausible connections, since in emblems the two types of sources, written and figurative, are conjoined.

In the conclusion of Ginzburg’s discussion of emblem collections, a fusion of two of his methodological preoccupations is evident: the concern of Bloch and some of his successors to tap the “collective mentalities” of past ages and the fruitful, although risky, Warburg method of considering artworks in their historical context. Methodologically, like the pioneers whose work he admires, the founders of the Annals and Warburg “schools”, Ginzburg’s reach is ambitious. Given his outstanding gift for selecting unusual and important research topics, his ingenuity in unearthing the documentation pertinent to them his skill in constructing hypotheses, and his facility in communicating his results, one can look forward to his future production with great anticipation and with considerable confidence that he will be increasingly successful in

developing and refining new approaches. For, all historians concerned with the development of their discipline and alert to sources of stimulation for their own work.

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