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*The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*,  
by Carlo Ginzburg; translated by John and Anne Tedeschi. New  
York: Penguin Books, 1982. Pp. xxviii + 177. NP.

I have said that, in my opinion, all 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, and among that number of angels, there was also God, *he too having been created out of that mass at the same time* ... [53; Ginzburg's emphasis].

So the Friulian miller Menocchio defiantly expounded his cosmogony when called before the inquisitor of the Holy Office in February of 1584. Menocchio was subjected to seven interrogations and two years of imprisonment before his release in 1586, weak in body and seemingly repentant in spirit. Thirteen years later he was brought back before the court for another series of interrogations and brief torture. He was executed in late 1599 at the age of 67 as a 'recidivist' heretic.

Before an early interrogation, Menocchio promised acquaintances, 'I would say enough to astonish everyone' (p. 12) — including, 400 years later, the remarkable Italian historian, Carlo Ginzburg, who came across his inquisitorial record in a small Friulian town in northeastern Italy. Ginzburg gives us a meticulous and memorable reading of Menocchio's mind and the individual circumstances and social conditions in which his ideas took shape. It is a portrait rare even in ethnographies of contemporary peasant societies. Ginzburg, with N. Z. Davis, E. L. Eisenstein, and others, is a central figure in studies of the popular culture of early modern Europe (Schutte's profile of Ginzburg is most useful; *Journal of Modern History*, 48 [1976: 296-315]); yet his work should not be ignored by any historian or social scientist of agrarian state societies. The present volume is a paperback issue of an earlier hardbound edition, fluently translated by the Tedeschis (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980; Italian original, 1976). Perhaps now Ginzburg will secure the wide readership he deserves among Anglo-American scholars.

In the beginning was putrefaction. To this 'peasant Heraclitus', God was born of chaos and did not exist prior to and apart from the air, earth, fire, and water that were the natural universe. His 'religious materialism' denied Christ's divinity and the efficacy of the sacraments. Menocchio disparaged the parasitic clergy, but revealed a broad tolerance for non-Christian believers.

With its hints of Anabaptist thought and ideas of contemporary secular humanists as well as glimpses of a core 'peasant religion', Ginzburg recognized in Menocchio's world-view the tortuous encounter of popular oral tradition with the written word. But in late sixteenth-century Europe, the written word was now the printed page, and the crossfire of books on the battlefield of religious ideas renders notions of 'collective mentalities' and 'elite hegemony' incapable of conveying the circulation and competition of ideas and cultural values among and between elites and lower classes. Indeed, what the inquisitors saw in Menocchio's testimony was the subversive powers of books. 'Can't you understand', Menocchio exclaimed to a fellow villager, 'the inquisitors don't want us to know what they know' (pp. 59, 103). Ginzburg argues that what emboldened Menocchio to speak out were the books that he had borrowed or bought — the vernacular *Bible*, an unexpurgated *Decameron*, Mandeville's *Travels*, perhaps even

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an Italian translation of the Koran. They gave him the words that he fashioned into speech, as the ideological initiative of the Counter-Reformation forced the occasion.

Were Ginzburg to have stopped with a recitation of the titles of books that passed through this obscure miller's hands, he, too, might have been content to label Menocchio's cosmos a simplified Anabaptism or convoluted Lutheranism. But Ginzburg pushes through to the far more vexing, central issue of *how* Menocchio read such works. Not surprisingly, he finds considerable distance and many contradictions between Menocchio's ruminations and the books that he claims as sources of support. Ginzburg refuses, however, to attribute such discrepancies to the fumbling misunderstandings of a barely literate countryman. On the contrary, they represent an aggressive reading of the text, a mutual appropriation — on the one hand, the reworking of images and ideas of the books in terms of equally rich, popular oral traditions and, on the other, a reinterpretation of those traditions through new metaphors and materials. In the first part of Mandeville's *Travels*, for example, descriptions of 'the different manners of Christians' in the Holy Land buttressed Menocchio's rejection of the power of the sacraments (pp. 42-44), while stories of a divinatory cannibalism in the imaginary Orient of the second part of the *Travels* pushed him to a more radical denial of an after-life of the soul. (One might wish to compare this with the complacent incorporation of reports of the exotic New World by European elites as only more pagan lands; see Michael Ryan's article in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23 [1981: 519-38].) For each 'source', Ginzburg is at pains to trace the mental transformations of the written word into Menocchio's spoken convictions. This is the principal fascination, and major achievement, of his study.

Historians of Europe will perhaps be troubled by Ginzburg's closing suggestion that Menocchio appeared at the end of a brief era of 'hidden but fruitful exchanges' between elite and popular culture and at the outset of a severe repression of popular culture and 'an indoctrination of the masses'; Schutte [*op. cit.*, 308] might relate such an extreme judgement to Ginzburg's intemperate anti-clericism. I would rather register some discomfort elsewhere, with Ginzburg's tendency to oppose the several contentious elite cultures with a monolithic 'peasant syncretism' (p. 144). Such phrases as 'the peasant culture' and 'the underground current of peasant radicalism' are too homogenizing in locating Menocchio's world-view in Friulian culture. In a countryside of cultivators, herders, artisans, and traders, cultural faultlines surely ran as deeply as those among the elite cultures of the time. Ginzburg is well aware of the social anomalies of a miller (p. 119). What of the cultural antagonisms and diversities of such a place that might deepen our appreciation of Menocchio's feelings of 'powerless desperation' and 'isolation' (Ginzburg's phrasing, p. 81)? Ironically, Menocchio's relationship with the written culture of his inquisitors is more sensitively treated than his place in the local cultural landscape.

In his preface (p. xii) to this English edition and in a long note (pp. 154-5), Ginzburg rejects an earlier critic's charge that his is a claim for the autonomy and continuity of peasant culture. Ginzburg insists that this book and his other works demonstrate the 'circularity' of influences between elite and popular levels of society. Such cultural reciprocity, I would agree, is one of Menocchio's lessons for us; it resonates with E. P. Thompson's depiction of 'patrician society' and 'plebian culture' in eighteenth-century England, with McKim Marriott's claim for India of the universalization of Little Traditions and the parochialization of the Great Tradition, and with James Scott's rendering of the tension between subordination to and subversion of elite values and ideologies by Southeast Asian peasantries. Menocchio was not a rare point of contact between a powerful wave of literate elite culture and a deep

current of immutable peasant culture. He was an active — and especially creative — agent of an ever-evolving and multi-stranded popular culture. To speak from my own discipline, anthropologists pursue those elusive moments when the meaningful expression of culture becomes a transformation of cultural meaning. This is precisely the drama of Menocchio's inquisition and the significance of Ginzburg's exposition.

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*Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War*, by Michael Malet. London: London School of Economics and Political Science and Macmillan, 1982. Pp. xxvii + 232; £25.00.

In his preface the author states that this book 'has three main aims: to place Makhno, and the movement he led, historically where they belong — in the context of a civil war and a conflict of ideas, neither of which is finished ... It is very much the author's hope that his work will be of interest outwith academic and left-wing political circles' (p. ix). Makhno is intriguing, both as an individual and as one of the losers in the confused aftermath of the civil war that followed the events of 1917 in the Ukraine. It would be good to have a work which placed him in his context. Though Mr Malet has consulted a considerable quantity of relevant material and writes enthusiastically about his hero, he fails to produce a clear and convincing picture, but perhaps, after all these years and given the nature of the evidence, this is to ask too much.