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CHAPTER 15

Witches and Shamans

The path which brought me metaphorically from northeastern Italy, where my research on witchcraft began, to the Central Asian steppes is a tortuous one. I shall try to trace the journey.

The great French sinologist Marcel Granet once said that "la méthode, c'est le chemin après qu'on l'a parcouru": method is the path after one has already taken it.[1] The word *method* actually comes from the Greek, even if the etymology proposed by Granet—*meta-hodos*, "after the path"—may be imaginary. But Granet's quip had a serious—in fact, polemical—side to it: in any scholarly situation a discussion on method has some value only when it is an a posteriori reflection on concrete research, not when it shows up (by far the most frequent case) as a series of a priori prescriptions. Perhaps the following account of the way in which my research began and subsequently developed may offer some confirmation, however slight and negligible, of Granet's ironic remark.

To recount the itinerary of a piece of research when it has already reached a conclusion (even if, by definition, a provisional conclusion) always brings a risk with it: a teleological one. Retrospectively, the uncertainties and errors vanish, or, rather, they become transformed into the steps which lead directly to the goal: the historian knows from the start what he wants, he searches for it, and finally finds it. But things do not happen like this in actual research. Life in any laboratory as described by Bruno Latour, a historian of science with an anthropological background, is much more confusing and untidy.[2]

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1. The experience that I am about to describe is itself fairly confused and untidy, though it pertains not to a group but to an individual—myself. It begins with an illumination, a research topic (witchcraft) which suddenly suggests itself to a student in his twenties at the University of Pisa toward the end of the 1950s. Until that very moment I was not at all certain that I wanted to become a historian, but as soon as the subject presented itself I no longer had any doubts. This was *my* topic, the topic I would be willing to work on for years (little did I imagine how many).

I have asked myself often about the reasons for this unexpected enthusiasm, which, to me, retrospectively, seems to have all the characteristics of falling in love: the suddenness, the enthusiasm, the lack of awareness (at least initially). I knew nothing about the history of witchcraft: my first move, later repeated many times for other research projects, was to look up the entry on *witchcraft* in the *Enciclopedia italiana* to obtain a bit of basic information. It may have been the first time I really experienced what I would call "the euphoria of ignorance": the sensation of not knowing anything but being on the verge of beginning to learn something. I think that the intense pleasure associated with that moment helped to keep me from becoming a specialist, of delving into a well-defined or limited field of study. Not only have I preserved the urge to confront periodically themes and areas of research of which I am totally ignorant, but it has grown more marked with the passing of time.

It happens often enough that a second-year university student chooses a research topic of which he is totally ignorant. But it is perhaps less common to note that a similar disparity between little or no preliminary knowledge and the importance of the objective probably characterizes all or almost all the truly important choices that a person makes in the course of a lifetime. (Retrospectively we call this disparity destiny). But what is it then that drives us to choose? At the time, behind my enthusiasm for the research theme that had suddenly loomed before my eyes, I think I can guess now that there lurked a congeries of childhood memories and experiences confusedly muddled with much more recent anxieties and prejudices.

How greatly was my choice influenced by the fairy tales that were recounted to me as a child? My mother used to read to me fables that had been collected at the end of the nineteenth century by the Sicilian writer Luigi Capuana. They were filled with every imaginable sort of magic and horror: she-dragons whose mouths were bloodied from the flesh of "lambs and kids who looked like children"; tiny beings innocent in appearance, bedecked in

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plumed turbans, who, after the page was turned, became transformed into monstrous werewolves with cavernous jaws. Crocetta, a young girl of the village in the Abruzzi where my parents lived for three years, used to tell my brother and me (as I discovered in something my mother, Natalia Ginzburg, had written in her *Inverno in Abruzzo*) stories not very different from those collected by Capuana. In one of them a boy is killed by his stepmother and given to his father to eat: at which point his bones, stripped of flesh, begin to sing: "And my dismal stepmother / Has cooked me in a kettle / While my gluttonous father / Has made a nice mouthful out of me."[3] Through the sinister ambiguities of such tales I, like all children, must have begun to decipher reality, beginning with the mysterious world of adults.

Cannibalism and animal metamorphoses are at the heart of *Storia notturna*.[4] The decision to study witchcraft immediately signified for me concentrating on the revelations of witches, in many respects so similar to the fables I heard in my early childhood. But the underlying motives for that choice, barely discerned at the time, were joined by others of an emotional and ideological order. I was born into a family that politically leaned to the left. My father, Leone Ginzburg, born in Odessa, who emigrated to Italy with his family, lost his position in the Department of Russian Literature at the University of Turin in 1934 because of his refusal to swear an oath of loyalty to the Fascist regime imposed on all academics. He was twenty-five at the time. Not long after that he was arrested for anti-Fascist activities and passed two years in prison. When Italy entered the war in 1940 as Germany's ally, as a Jew and as an anti-Fascist he was interned at Pizzoli, a village in the Abruzzi near L'Aquila, where he was joined by his family. At the fall of the Fascist regime he went to Rome, where he resumed his political activities. Arrested and recognized by the Nazis, he died in 1944 in the wing of the prison Regina Coeli which was under German control. In his book *Il populismo russo* Franco Venturi, the Turin historian, spoke of the writings and person of my father, whom he had known and been close to in the circles of anti-Fascist émigrés in Paris, as "a new and original incarnation" of the spirit of the *narodniki*.[5] At the heart of the Russian populist experience one finds a strong moral and intellectual affinity for the values expressed by peasant society. I discovered a similar perspective in a book which was published after the war and then promptly translated into several languages, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*). The author—the writer, physician, and painter Carlo Levi, had been a friend of my father's, and had participated with him

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in the anti-Fascist activities of the group Giustizia e Libertà. He, too, was condemned by the regime to internal exile in a small village in Lucania.[6] Undoubtedly, these affinities contributed to the profound impact that *Christ Stopped at Eboli* had on me when I read it as an adolescent. A feeling of identification was inevitable, even if the village described by Levi was much more isolated and primitive than the one where I had passed a part of my early childhood. But I was struck by more than the circumstances of the writing of the book. Levi never conceals the differences between himself and the peasants of southern Italy, from their ideas and beliefs; but he never assumes a tone of superiority toward them. He takes everything seriously, including their charms and magic rituals. From *Christ Stopped at Eboli* I think I learned that intellectual detachment and emotional participation, passion for rationality and respect for cultural diversity, are not only compatible attitudes but also capable of sustaining one another. From my mother I learned something even more important (not limited to my research)—namely, that there is no relation between intelligence and social and cultural position.

Looking back, I think that both the lasting impression made by the fables I listened to in my childhood and the populism I imbibed from my family milieu contributed to my research becoming oriented from the outset toward the study of the victims of persecution rather than to the persecution itself. Historiographically it was an anomalous choice in two ways. At the end of the 1950s, witchcraft, which had long before entered the canon of anthropological study, was still considered by the majority of historians (as the Englishman Keith Thomas observed with some irony) a marginal and bizarre area of research.[7] At most, one admitted the legitimacy of studying the persecution of witchcraft as an aberrant episode in the intellectual history of late medieval and early modern Europe. During the 1970s and '80s this actually became a fashionable historiographical current: but the interest of historians, even though much more complex than in the past, has continued to focus almost exclusively on the persecution and its cultural and social mechanisms. The victims almost always have remained in the shadows.[8]

These are some of the motives that impelled me in this direction. At this point, I should add another: the difficulty of research of this type. Some of the most serious obstacles emerged along the way: at the time I noticed one especially—the apparently similar forms assumed by the practice of witchcraft (not by its persecution) in ages and places far removed from one another. I thought that it would be necessary, in order to reintroduce witchcraft into

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history, to historicize its apparently atemporal features. Obviously there was an inevitable trace of youthful arrogance in this willingness to confront a cognitive challenge: the desire to prove to others, and especially to oneself, what we are capable of, on the threshold of the shadowy edge discussed by Conrad.

I have left for last an element which struck me many years later, when a friend brought to my attention that the choice to study witchcraft, and especially the victims of the persecution of witchcraft, was not so strange after all for a Jew who had experienced persecution himself.[9] I was dumbfounded by this simple remark. How could such an obvious fact have eluded me? And yet for years the analogy between Jew and witch, and the resulting possibility that I could have identified myself with the subject of my research, had never dawned on me. Today I am inclined to view in this the effect of repression. What is at once both evident and hidden, Freud taught us, is that which we do not want to behold.

2. Although I have gone on at some length in discussing these personal circumstances, I should like to resist the narcissistic temptation which is in all of us and look at them as the data of an experiment in vitro. It is or should be obvious that the biography of a historian—from family circumstances to education and, of course, friendships—is not irrelevant to an understanding of his or her work. But usually one does not go beyond the mere stating of this fact. I should like to take advantage of what, conventionally, we call *identity*, in a sense that is both biological and personal (even if a term like *contiguity* would be preferable), between the person I am now and the person I was then to examine retrospectively the role these elements played in my actual research. Those I have mentioned thus far contributed to the selection of a theme (witchcraft) from a particular vantage point (the victims of persecution). But none of these factors, from the most subconscious (my being a Jew) to the most conscious (the desire to cross over disciplines), implied a specific research hypothesis. The idea with which I began—namely, that witchcraft in some cases could have been a rough and elementary form of class struggle—today simply seems like an attempt to justify, to myself and to others, research lacking true historiographical legitimacy. My willingness to transgress disciplines, in other words, was not boundless.

Behind my hypothesis was an encounter with essays by Eric Hobsbawm, those collected in his *Primitive Rebels* (1959), but especially a survey of studies

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entitled "Per la storia delle classi subalterne" ("For the History of the Subaltern Classes"), which he published in 1960 in *Società*, the ideological journal of the Italian Communist Party. The title of the survey echoed a term used by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. For me, as for so many other Italian students of my generation, reading Gramsci had been a decisive event. But the Gramsci that Hobsbawm proposed was a Gramsci read and interpreted through the prism of British social anthropology.[10] The works of anthropology into which I delved in those years were actually others: first of all there was Lévi-Strauss, who thirty years later was to serve as the principal interlocutor of my *Storia notturna*.

I began by reading the inquisitorial trials housed in the Archivio di Stato in Modena. Among those documents I came upon a 1519 trial against a peasant woman, Chiara Signorini, accused of having tried to murder, through magic, her mistress, a woman who had chased her and her husband away from the piece of land which they worked.[11] "Historians usually find what they are looking for, a fact that makes me uneasy," wrote Morton Smith, the American student of Judaism and Christian origins.[12] I am not certain whether I, too, may have experienced some embarrassment in the face of the unexpected confirmation of my hypothesis that witchcraft was a basic instrument of class warfare, but, in any case, my research promptly took another direction.

Early on, by the time of the conclusion to the essay I wrote on that trial, I emphasized that it might be possible to discern in inquisitorial documents not only the overlay in the text that could be attributed to the judges, but also (and this was much more unexpected) the voices of the accused, expressions of a starkly different culture.[13] The struggle and conflict remained central, but they were transferred to a cultural plane, capable of being deciphered by a close reading of the texts. The writings of some of the Romance philologists—Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, Gianfranco Contini—encouraged me to proceed in this direction. I tried to learn from them the art of "slow reading" (this, as Roman Jakobson has reminded us, is philology),[14] applying it to nonliterary texts.

I say all this with the wisdom of hindsight: I do not want to project into the past a clarity that I certainly lacked then. In 1961–1962 I went about Italy on the trail of inquisitorial archives. There were moments of doubt and disappointment when I thought I was wasting time. My initial hypothesis of perceiving witchcraft as an elementary form of class struggle no longer pleased me, but I could not seem to replace it with a more satisfactory one. I came to

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Venice, to the State Archives which house one of Italy's richest inquisitorial collections: more than one hundred and fifty large bundles *(buste)* of more than three thousand trials, which span over two and a half centuries from the mid-sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth, at which time the Inquisition was suppressed in Venice. Each day scholars request a limited number of bundles: at the time I believe the limit was three. Since I did not know, literally, what I was searching for, I put in my request at random—for example, bundles no. 8, 15, and 37—and then I began to leaf through the trial records. I had the feeling I was playing a sort of Venetian roulette. These trivial details underline the total unpredictability of my discovery: the proceedings in 1591 against a young drover of Latisana, a small village not too far from Venice. The herdsman, named Menichino della Nota, recounted to the inquisitor that four times yearly he went out at night in spirit, together with some others who, like him, had been born with the caul and were called *benandanti* (at the time a completely new and incomprehensible word to me), to fight against warlocks in a vast field of roses, the field of Josaphat. If the *benandanti* prevailed, the harvest would be abundant; if the warlocks conquered, there would be famine.

I remember vividly that after reading the document, of not more than three or four pages, I became so agitated that I had to interrupt my work. While I strolled up and down outside the archive smoking one cigarette after another it struck me that I had had a wonderful stroke of luck. I still think so, but today this observation seems insufficient. A totally unexpected document had been laid before me by pure chance: why, I ask myself, did I react with such excitement? It is as though I had *recognized* instantly a text that had been totally unknown to me until a moment before—not only that, but one that was completely unlike any other trial of the Inquisition that I had ever seen. And this is precisely the point.

As a student I had the good fortune of taking a seminar with Gianfranco Contini. At one point, he began telling us an anecdote. There were two Romance philologists, both French, but otherwise very dissimilar. The first had a long beard and a passion for morphological, grammatical, and syntactical irregularities; when he encountered one he would stroke his beard and murmur with pleasure: "*C'est bizarre*." The second philologist, a true representative of the Cartesian tradition, with a highly lucid mind and totally bald, tried in every way possible to lead every linguistic phenomenon back to a rule: and when he succeeded he rubbed his hands, saying "*C'est satisfaisant*

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pour l'esprit." I am willing to admit that the conflict between anomaly and analogy embodied in Contini's two philologists (a contest that began more than two thousand years ago with the grammarians of the Alexandrine age) is a conflict in name only. In truth, they are complementary positions. And yet I have to confess that my impulse is to identify with the bearded philologist, the one who loved anomalies: this is due to a psychological inclination which, however, I would consider justifying even on rational terms. The violation of the norm contains even the norm itself, inasmuch as it is presupposed; the opposite is not true. Anyone who studies the functioning of a society beginning from the entirety of its norms, or from statistical fictions such as the average man or the average woman, inevitably remains on the surface of things. I think that the in-depth analysis of an anomalous case is much more fruitful, though the contemplation of an isolated oddity does not usually interest me.

This is the course that I ended up pursuing with witchcraft. I started from an anomalous document (the questioning of the *benandante* Menichino della Nota) and ended up reconstructing an anomalous and geographically peripheral phenomenon (the beliefs of the Friulian *benandanti*). This, in turn, provided the key to decipher the origins of the witches' Sabbath on a huge scale—the whole of Eurasia.[15] *Storia notturna*, just like *I benandanti* twenty years earlier, literally originated from these three pages found by chance so many years ago in the Archivio di Stato in Venice. What was it that induced me, I asked myself, to react so strongly to a totally unexpected document? I think I can answer: the same sort of reasoning that might have persuaded someone else to consider the same document as largely irrelevant, if not actually to push it aside altogether. Today, and even more so thirty years ago, the account of an ecstatic experience offered by a sixteenth-century herdsman in fairy-tale and absolutely exceptional terms most likely would be treated by a serious historian as colorful evidence of the ignorance of people who obstinately ignored the instruction imparted by ecclesiastical authorities.[16]

The chance which brought me to the inquisitorial dossier of the *benandante* Menichino della Nota might never have occurred. And yet at times it crossed my mind that the document was there waiting for me, and that my entire past life had predisposed me to find it. I believe there is a nucleus of truth in all this absurd fantasizing. Knowing, as Plato wrote, is always an act of *recognizing*. It is only that which we already know, that which is already part of our myriad experiences, that permits us to apprehend what is new,

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isolating it from the mass of miscellaneous and casual pieces of information that continually plummet down on us.

3. In the witchcraft trials celebrated in Europe over two and a half centuries, from the beginning of the fifteenth to the middle of the seventeenth century and beyond, we behold in almost every instance communication—coerced, propped up by psychological influences and the menace of torture—which moves unilaterally. The judges, whether lay or ecclesiastical, knew what they could expect from the accused, and they pressed for it by suggestive questioning or by force. They did not always obtain what they wanted: occasionally, the defendants persisted in proclaiming their innocence, or succumbed to the torture. To be sure, not everything that was confessed resulted from the pressure exerted by the judges: the descriptions of charms and magic intended to achieve some illicit end clearly emanated from the different culture of the defendants. But in the case of the Sabbath—that nocturnal gathering filled with orgies, banquets, and the paying of homage to the devil—the men and women accused of witchcraft seem to be only reproducing, with just a few variations, a scheme developed by demonologists and then imposed during the persecution of witchcraft in most of Europe and eventually the Americas.

The picture that emerges from the *benandanti* trials is entirely different. These proceedings are dominated (especially the earlier ones) by a total failure to communicate between judges and defendants. The *benandanti* spoke, often without even being asked, of the battles for fertility which they fought at night, in spirit, armed with stalks of fennel, against witches and warlocks armed with canes of sorghum. For the inquisitors this was all incomprehensible; the very term *benandante* was new to them, and for over fifty years they kept asking what it meant. It is this inability to communicate that brought to the surface a deep and hidden stratum of beliefs: an ecstatic cult hinging on fertility, which was still very much alive in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries among the peasants in a northeasterly region like the Friuli, then under Venetian domination.

After an initial bafflement, the inquisitors tried to orient themselves. Since the tales of the nocturnal fertility battles made them think of the Sabbath, they tried to coax the *benandanti*, without recourse to torture, to admit they were warlocks. The *benandanti* at first protested vigorously in the face of this pressure: but gradually they gave in. In their revelations, given over a fifty-year span, we see bit by bit the image of the witches' Sabbath insinuate

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itself. This mutation, which we can trace step-by-step, as if in slow motion, made me wonder if a similar phenomenon—namely, the imposition of the image of the sabbat on a stratum of beliefs extraneous to it—could be verified elsewhere.

But this hypothesis, which I attempted to verify in *Storia notturna*, still does not tell us anything about the ecstatic experiences recounted by the *benandanti* with such an abundance of colorful details. Unlike the inquisitors, I was not in a position to influence their accounts. But I, too, just like the inquisitors, tried to turn into an analogy the anomaly I had stumbled upon, inserting it into an appropriate category. The similarity between *benandanti* and shamans struck me with what seemed irresistible evidence. In both instances we are dealing with individuals whose physical or psychological characteristics, frequently tied to the circumstances of their birth, designate them as highly skilled in achieving states of ecstasy. In both cases the ecstasy is accompanied by the going forth of the spirit, often in the shape of an animal. In both cases the spirit, whether of the shaman or the *benandante*, becomes involved in hazardous activities on which the health or material well-being of the community depends.

In the preface to *I Benandanti: The Night Battles*, I tried to explain that I had not dealt with the relationship between *benandanti* and shamans, which I pronounced unquestioned, so as not to sink to the level of a purely typological comparison. I stated that by doing so I was following the example of Marc Bloch, who, in his *Rois thaumaturges*, had juxtaposed strictly historical comparisons between phenomena belonging to societies that were historically contiguous and to anthropological studies of societies without documented historical ties. Bloch, writing in 1924, cited J. G. Frazer as an example of this second type of correlation. But almost a half century later, I was not able to deal with the question in the same terms. The ahistorical comparison to be reckoned with was that of Lévi-Strauss, or at least so I thought. For a time, while writing *The Night Battles*, I played around with the idea of presenting my documentation in two different ways: the first, historical; the second, formal-structural. I was under the impression that by choosing the first of the alternatives (as I ended up doing), I could not succeed in dealing satisfactorily with the elements which seemed to be historically intractable, the first of which were the analogies between *benandanti* and shamans.

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The dilemma "history or structure" cropped up anew in the mid-1970s when I decided to confront the problems I had left unresolved in the book on the *benandanti,* but on a much larger scale than just the area of the Friuli. Meanwhile, my position had changed, now taking two apparently opposing directions. On the one hand, I was no longer willing to exclude from my research possible ahistorical connections. On the other, I was no longer so convinced that the relationship between *benandanti* and shamans was purely typological. The first path took me away from historiography; the second led me back in, but through a problem that any historian would have judged simply inappropriate.

The book which I ended up writing, *Storia notturna (Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath),* is the result of these contrasting pressures. It opens with a first, definitely historical part founded on the emergence of the idea of the conspiracy, the mainstay of the inquisitorial stereotype of the Sabbath. This is followed by a second part, organized about purely morphological criteria. It analyzes a number of ecstatic cults of a shamanic type, which can be documented over much of Europe. The Friulian *benandanti* reappear in this context, in a maze of cults which includes the *kresniki* of the Balkan Peninsula, the *burkudzäutä* of the Caucasus, the Hungarian *táltos,* the *noajdi* of Lapland, and so forth. The inclusion of Hungary and Lapland are especially significant because these areas belong to the linguistic Finno-Ugric sphere, inhabited by peoples whose distant ancestors came or could have come from central Asia. In the cases of the Hungarian *táltos* and of the Lapp *noajdi* the resemblance to shamans is especially close. We can consider them a bridge between central Asia and such regions as the Friuli, the Balkan Peninsula, or Caucasian Ossetia, inhabited by peoples speaking Indo-European languages. How can we explain this geographical distribution? Chapter 1 in the third part of *Storia notturna* proposes a historical solution consisting of a possible diffusion of shamanistic beliefs and practices from Asia to Europe, by way of the Scythians, who spoke an Iranian language, thus belonging to Indo-European stock, perhaps originating in central Asia. A few centuries before the Christian era they settled in an area north of the Black Sea, whence they entered into contact with Greeks and Celts. But this chapter, entitled "Eurasian Conjectures," ends by stressing the limitations in diffusion theories. As Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote, cultural transmission can be explained by external connections, but only internal connections can explain their permanence.

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This objection thrusts to the foreground once again the dilemma "history or structure." I have thought for quite some time that the impossibility of choosing between them was connected to a lessening within me (and around me) of the ideological motivations which in the past had urged me on toward an explanation in historical terms. In my mind I have often compared myself to Buridan's donkey (forced to die from hunger), renouncing the completion of my book, stuck between two interpretations that from the documentary aspect were equally valid.

Not long ago this dilemma appeared to me in a new light. It took the form of a possibility suggested to me by Adriano Sofri when he connected a sentence in my book on the Sabbath that dealt with the possibility of demonstrating experimentally the existence of human nature with what has been called my mother's "personal doctrine of natural law."[17] I asked myself if the opposite thesis, the one from which I had set out twenty-five years earlier, could instead be traced back to the historicism of my father. I do not think I can rule this out even if the historicism that initially guided my research was not Croce's (whose books I read in copies belonging to my father, who had been very attached to him), but its radical version, disowned by Croce, as proposed by Ernesto De Martino in his *Il mondo magico*.[18] The existence of this psychological dimension, of which I was at first totally unaware, could have influenced my work in two ways. First, the dilemma which confronted me for so long could have become simply paralyzing in the same way that the child feels unable to choose when he is asked whom he loves more, his mother or his father; second, I might have felt impelled to find some solution which might be compatible not only with the required documentation, but with my psychological demands as well.

4. One thing should be clear: I certainly do not think that the specific answers with which I ended up in my research were psychologically determined. I ask myself, however, if, to become acceptable to me, they perhaps had to be reconciled with a subconscious psychological veto that might have rejected them as absurd or unfounded. If this veto indeed exists, as I believe it does, and not just in my case, I can understand in hindsight why my decision to evade the whole dilemma seemed acceptable. The second chapter in part 3 of *Storia notturna*, the longest in the book, attempts to combine the two perspectives—the historical and the structural or morphological—by analyzing a single element in that complex of beliefs that became absorbed in

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the stereotype of the sabbat: the devil's lameness. I cannot recapitulate here the exceedingly complex argument which led me to find a common thread binding apparently very different personages like Oedipus and Cinderella. But even this hasty recounting of *Storia notturna* must have demonstrated that history and morphology are not juxtaposed in it (as in the project, later abandoned, of a twofold version of *I benandanti*), but rather interwoven: two alternating voices in debate, finally finding agreement. It was a choice that reflects that incessant inner discussion during the fifteen years that it took me to write *Storia notturna*.

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