1

His name was Domenico Scandella, but he was called Menocchio. He was born in 1532 (at his first trial he claimed he was fifty-two years old) in Montereale, a small hill town of the Friuli twenty-five kilometers north of Pordenone at the foot of the mountains. Here he had always lived, except for two years when he was banished following a brawl (1564–65). These years he spent at the neighboring village of Arba and in an unspecified place in the Carnia. He was married and had eleven children, four of whom had died. He declared to the canon Giambattista Maro, vicar general to the inquisitor of Aquileia and Concordia, that he earned his living as a "miller, carpenter, sawyer, mason, and other things." But mostly he worked as a miller; he also wore the traditional miller's costume, a jacket, cloak, and a cap of white wool. Thus dressed in white he presented himself at his trial in 1584.

A couple of years later he told the inquisitors that he was "very poor": "I do not have anything but two rented mills and two fields in perpetual lease, and with these I have supported and continue to support my poor family." But certainly he must have been exaggerating. Even if a good part of the income went to pay the rent (probably in produce) on the two mills, in addition to the ground rent on the land, there must have been enough left over to live on and to scrape by on even in difficult times. When he had found himself banished to Arba, he had immediately rented

another mill. When his daughter Giovanna married (Menocchio had died about a month before), she received a dowry equal to 256 lire and 9 soldi: she wasn't rich but she was not that poor either, considering the practices of the area in those years.

On the whole, it seems that Menocchio's place in the small world of Montereale wasn't the most negligible. In 1581 he had been mayor of the village and surrounding hamlets (Gaio, Grizzo, San Lonardo, San Martino) as well as, at an unspecified date, "*camararo*" or administrator of the parish church of Montereale. We don't know if here, as in other localities of the Friuli, the old system of rotating offices had been replaced by elections. If the latter were true, the fact that he knew how to "read, write, and add" might have given Menocchio an advantage. Administrators, in fact, were almost always selected from among persons who had attended an elementary public school, even learning perhaps a little Latin. Schools of this type existed at Aviano and at Pordenone; Menocchio may have attended one of these.

On 28 September 1583 Menocchio was denounced to the Holy Office. He was accused of having uttered "heretical and most impious words" about Christ. It wasn't a matter of an occasional blasphemy. Menocchio had actually tried to disseminate his opinions, bolstering them up by "preaching and dogmatizing shamelessly," a fact that seriously aggravated his situation.

His attempts at proselytization were attested to abundantly at the preliminary inquest, which opened a month later at Portogruaro and was continued at Concordia and in Montereale itself. "He is always arguing with somebody about the faith just for the sake of arguing—even with the priest," Francesco Fasseta testified to the vicar general. And another witness, Domenico Melchiori added: "He will argue with anyone, and when he started to debate with me I said to him: 'I am a shoemaker, and you a miller, and you are not an educated man, so what's the use of talking about it?' " Such questions concerning the faith are supposed to be exalted and difficult, out of reach of millers and cobblers. To talk about them one needed knowledge, and the repositories of knowledge were, above all, the priests. But Menocchio liked to say that he didn't believe the Holy Spirit governed the church, adding, "Priests want us under their thumb, just to keep us quiet, while they have a good time"; as for him, *he* knew God better than they did. So when the village priest took him to the vicar general in Concordia so that he might be set straight, the priest warned him, "these fancies of yours are heresies," and Menocchio promised not to meddle in such matters again—only to begin anew soon afterward. In the public square, at the inn, on his way to Grizzo or Daviano, returning from the mountains, "no matter who his companion might be," stated Giuliano Stefanut, "he usually turns the conversation to matters concerning God, and always introduces some sort of heresy. And then he argues and shouts in defense of his opinion."

2

It isn't easy to understand, from the records of the inquiry, what the villagers' reaction was to Menocchio's words. It's clear that no one was willing to admit to having listened approvingly to the talk of a suspected heretic. In fact, one of them went so far as to tell the vicar general who was conducting the inquest of his own indignant reaction: "Menocchio, please, for the love of God, do not say such things!" Domenico Melchiori claimed to have exclaimed. And Giuliano Stefanut testified: "I told him many times, and especially on our way to Grizo, that I am fond of him but I cannot stand his talking about things that concern the faith, because I would always fight with him, and if he killed me a hundred times and I returned to life, I should die for the faith again." The priest Andrea Bionima even uttered a veiled threat: "Be still, Domenego, do not say such things, because one day you may regret it." Another witness, Giovanni Povoledo, addressing the vicar general, ventured to pin a label on Menocchio, however vague: "He has a bad reputation; he has evil ideas like those of the sect of Luther." But this chorus of voices shouldn't mislead us. Almost all those interrogated declared that they had known Menocchio for a long time, some for thirty or forty years, some for twenty-five, some for twenty. One, Daniele Fasseta, said that he knew him "from childhood because we were in the same parish." Apparently, some of Menocchio's assertions went back not just a few days but "many years," as much as thirty years before. In all that time no one in the village had denounced him, yet his talk was known to everyone: people repeated it—perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps shaking their heads. In the testimony gathered by the vicar general one doesn't discern real hostility toward Menocchio, at most disapproval. True, some of the testimony came from his relatives, for example, Francesco Fasseta or Bartolomeo d'Andrea, his wife's cousin, who called him "an honorable man." But even Giuliano Stefanut who had stood up to Menocchio and had declared himself ready to "die for the faith," added "I like him very much." This miller who had been mayor of the village and administrator of the parish church certainly wasn't living on the fringes of the community of Montereale. Many years later at the time of the second trial a witness asserted, "I see him having dealings with many, and I think he is everybody's friend." And yet at a

certain point someone had denounced him, a denunciation that paved the way for the inquest.

Menocchio's children, as we shall see, immediately suspected that the anonymous accuser was the priest of Montereale, don Odorico Vorai, and they weren't mistaken. The two had a long-standing disagreement. For four years Menocchio actually had been going outside the town for confession. Granted, Vorai's testimony, which closed the preliminary inquest, was singularly vague: "I don't remember specifically what things he said. I have a bad memory and had other things on my mind." Apparently, no one was in a better position to inform the Holy Office on this matter than he was, but the vicar general didn't press him. He had no need to; it had been Vorai himself, instigated by another priest, don Ottavio Montereale, a member of the local seigneurial family, who had furnished the circumstantial evidence on which the vicar general based the specific questions he addressed to the witnesses.

The hostility of the local clergy can be easily explained. As we saw, Menocchio didn't recognize any special authority in the ecclesiastical hierarchy when it came to questions of the faith: "What popes! What prelates! What priests! These words were spoken with contempt. He just did not believe in these people," Domenico Melchiori testified. By haranguing and arguing in the streets and inns, Menocchio must have ended by practically setting himself up against the authority of the priest. But what was Menocchio saying, in fact?

To begin with, not only did he blaspheme "beyond measure" but he also insisted that to blaspheme is not a sin (according to another witness, he had said that to blaspheme against the saints wasn't sinful, but to blaspheme against God was). He added sarcastically, "Everybody has his calling, some to plow, some to hoe, and I have mine, which is to blaspheme." He also said strange things, which the villagers reported in a more or less fragmentary and disconnected way to the vicar general: "The air is God . . . the earth is our mother"; "Who do you imagine God to be? God is nothing but a little breath, and whatever else man imagines him to be"; "Everything that we see is God, and we are gods"; "The sky, earth, sea, air, abyss, and hell, all is God"; "What did you think, that Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary? It's impossible that she gave birth to him and remained a virgin. It might very well have been this, that he was a good man, or the son of a good man." Finally, it was said that Menocchio possessed prohibited books, particularly the Bible in the vernacular: "He is always arguing with one person or another, and he has the vernacular Bible and imagines that he bases his reasoning on it, and he remains obstinate in these arguments of his."

While the evidence was accumulating, Menocchio sensed that something was shaping up against him. So he had gone to the vicar of Polcenigo, Giovanni Daniele Melchiori, a childhood friend who urged him to present himself voluntarily to the Holy Office, or at least to obey immediately if he should be called. He warned Menocchio: "Tell them what they want to know, and try not to talk too much; do not go out of your way to discuss these things. Answer only their questions." Even Alessandro Policreto, an ex-lawyer who Menocchio had met casually in the home of a friend, a lumber merchant, had advised him to present himself before the judges and admit his guilt, but also to declare that he had never believed his own heretical statements. And so Menocchio went to Maniago in response to the summons of the ecclesiastical court. But the next day, 4 February, the inquisitor himself, the Franciscan Fra Felice da Montefalco, who had followed the course of the inquest, ordered him arrested and "conducted in handcuffs" to the prison of the Holy Office in Concordia. On 7 February 1584 Menocchio faced his first interrogation.

3

Despite the advice he had received, Menocchio immediately proved quite ready to talk, although he tried to put himself in a more favorable light than suggested by the testimony of the witnesses. While admitting that two or three years earlier he had had some doubts on the virginity of Mary and had expressed these doubts to several individuals, including a priest at Barcis, he observed: "It is true that I said these things to various people, but I was not telling them they should believe all this. On the contrary, I urged many of them: 'Would you like me to teach you the true way? Try to do good and walk in the path of my ancestors and follow what Holy Mother Church commands.' But I uttered those other words because I was tempted to believe them and teach them to others. It was the evil spirit who made me believe those things and who also persuaded me to say them to others." With these very words, Menocchio unwittingly confirmed the suspicion that in the town he had taken upon himself the role of teacher of doctrine and behavior ("Would you like me to teach you the true way?"). It was impossible to doubt the heretical nature of this kind of preaching—especially when Menocchio explained his singular cosmogony. A confused echo of it had reached the Holy Office: "I have said that, in my opinion, all was chaos, that is, earth, air,

water, and fire were mixed together; 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, and he was made lord, with four captains, Lucifer, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. That Lucifer sought to make himself lord equal to the king, who was the majesty of God, and for this arrogance God ordered him driven out of heaven with all his host and his company; and this God later created Adam and Eve and people in great number to take the places of the angels who had been expelled. And as this multitude did not follow God's commandments, he sent his Son, whom the Jews seized, and he was crucified." But, Menocchio added, "I never said that he allowed himself to be hung up like a beast." (It was one of the accusations that had been made against him: later, he did admit that yes, perhaps, he might have said something of the kind.) "Indeed, I really said that he let himself be crucified, and he who was crucified was one of the children of God, because we are all God's children, and of the same nature as the one who was crucified and he was a man like the rest of us, but with more dignity just as the pope is a man like us, but of greater rank, because he has power, and he who was crucified was born of St. Joseph and Mary, the Virgin."

4

During the preliminary inquest, because of the strange tales reported by witnesses, the vicar general had first asked them if Menocchio spoke "in earnest or in jest" and later, if he was of sound mind. The answer to both questions had been clear: Menocchio spoke "in earnest" and "he was sane, not mad." Actually, after the beginning of the trial it had been one of his children, Ziannuto, at the suggestion of some of his father's friends (Sebastiano Sebenico and an unidentified "pre Lunardo"), who spread the word that Menocchio was "mad" or "possessed." But the vicar put no worth in this, and the trial continued. There had been the temptation to dismiss Menocchio's opinions, and especially his cosmogony—the cheese, the milk, the worm-angels, God, the angel created out of chaos—as a mass of impious but innocuous fantasies, but it was discarded. A century or so later Menocchio probably would have been committed to an insane asylum, as someone affected by "religious delirium." But while the Counter-Reformation was in full sway, methods of exclusion were different, the most prevalent being that of identifying and prosecuting one as a heretic.

5

Let's put aside Menocchio's conception of the universe for the time being and follow instead the progress of the trial. Immediately after Menocchio's arrest, one of his sons, Ziannuto, had tried to assist him in a number of ways: he hired a lawyer, a certain Trappola of Portogruaro, he went to Serravalle to confer with the inquisitor, he obtained a statement from Montereale in favor of the prisoner and sent it to the lawyer, offering to obtain additional character references if they were required: "and if evidence is needed from Montereale that the prisoner went to confession and took communion every year, the priests will provide it; if there is need of proof from the village that he had been mayor and warden *(retor)* in the five hamlets, it will be provided; and if necessary, confirmation can also be given that he had been administrator of the parish church of Montereale and performed his duty honorably, and also that he had served as collector of tithes *(scodador)* of the parish church of Montereale. . . . " Also, with his brothers, Ziannuto (who was illiterate) pressured the parish priest of Montereale, who in his eyes was responsible for the whole affair, into writing a letter to Menocchio, then confined in the prison of the Holy Office. The priest urged Menocchio to promise "complete obedience to the holy Church and say that you do not believe and are not about to believe anything except what is commanded by God our Lord and the holy Church, and that you intend to live and die in the Christian faith as commanded by the holy, Roman, Catholic, and apostolic Church; in fact, that you would be ready, if need be, to give up your life and a thousand more lives, if you had so many to give, for love of the Lord God and of the holy Christian faith, since you know that you have your life and every good thing from Holy Mother Church . . . " Apparently, Menocchio didn't recognize the hand of his enemy, the parish priest, behind these words. Instead he attributed them to a Domenego Femenussa, a wool and lumber merchant who came to his mill and occasionally lent him money. But, in any case, Menocchio found it difficult to follow the advice given in the letter. At the end of the first interrogation (7 February) he said to the vicar general with evident reluctance: "Sir, I can't tell you whether what I said, either through the inspiration of God or the devil, is the truth or a lie, but I ask for mercy and will follow what is taught me." He was seeking to

be forgiven but was not retracting anything. During four long examinations (7, 16, 22 February and 8 March), he stood his ground against the vicar's objections—he denied, he explained, he reaffirmed. "It would appear from the trial records," Vicar Maro stated, "that you have said you do not believe in the pope, nor in the laws of the Church, and that everyone has as much authority as the pope." To which Menocchio replied, "I beg Almighty God to strike me dead this instant if I am aware that I said what your Lordship charges." But, he was asked, was it true he had said that Masses for the dead were useless? (According to Giuliano Stefanut, the words spoken by Menocchio one day when they were returning from Mass had been precisely these: "What are you doing giving alms in memory of these few ashes?") "I meant," Menocchio explained, "that we should be concerned about helping each other while we are still in this world, because afterwards God is the one who governs over souls; the prayers and alms and Masses offered for the dead are done, as I understand it, for love of God, who then does as he pleases, because souls do not come to take those prayers and alms, and it belongs to the majesty of God to receive these good works either for the benefit of the living or the dead." It was intended to be a clever explanation, but actually it contradicted the teachings of the Church on purgatory. "Do not try to talk too much," the priest of Polcenigo, a friend who had known Menocchio well from infancy, had advised. But, obviously, the latter couldn't restrain himself.

Suddenly, toward the end of April, a new element entered the picture. The provincial Venetian governors *(rettori)* requested that Fra Felice da Montefalco, the inquisitor of Aquileia and Concordia, comply with the Venetian regulations requiring the presence of a secular official along with ecclesiastical judges in all Holy Office cases. The conflict between the two jurisdictions was of long standing. We don't know if the defense lawyer, Trappola, hoping to advance his client's interests, was behind this particular move. At any rate, Menocchio was conducted to the mayor's residence in Portogruaro, where, in the presence of the mayor, he had to certify the interrogations that had already taken place. After this the trial resumed.

Many times in the past, Menocchio had told his fellow townsmen that he was ready to and, in fact, desirous of stating his own "opinions" on matters of the faith before religious and secular authorities. "He said to me," Francesco Fasseta related, "that if he ever ended up in the hands of the law for this, he would like to go peacefully, but that if he were treated poorly, he would speak out against superiors about their evil deeds." And Daniele Fasseta asserted: "Domenego said that if he did not fear for his life he would say enough to astonish everyone; I think he meant talking about the faith." Menocchio verified this testimony before the mayor of Portogruaro and the inquisitor of Aquileia and Concordia: "It's true I said that if I did not have to fear the sword of justice I would amaze everyone with my talk; and I said 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." Then they urged him to talk, and Menocchio threw caution to the wind. It was the 28th of April.

6

He began by denouncing the way the rich tyrannized the poor in the courts by using such an incomprehensible language as Latin: "I think speaking Latin is a betrayal of the poor because in lawsuits the poor do not know what is being said and are crushed; and if they want to say four words they need a lawyer." But this was only one instance of a prevailing exploitation in which the Church was an accomplice and participant: "And it seems to me that under our law, the pope, cardinals, and bishops are so great and rich that everything belongs to the church and to the priests, and they oppress the poor, who, if they work two rented fields, these will be fields that belong to the Church, to some bishop or cardinal." It should be remembered that Menocchio leased two fields whose owners are never identified; as for his Latin, apparently it was nothing more than the Credo and the Pater Noster learned while serving Mass; and his son Ziannuto had hastened to find him a lawyer as soon as he had been arrested by the Holy Office. But these coincidences, or possible coincidences, shouldn't mislead us. Even if Menocchio's opinions grew out of his own predicament, they ended by becoming much broader in scope. His call for a church that would abandon its privileges and reduce itself to poverty alongside the poor was tied to a different religious concept, rooted in the Gospels, free of dogmatic requirements, and reduced to a core of practical precepts: "I would want us to believe in the majesty of God, to be good, and to do as Jesus Christ commanded when he replied to those Jews who questioned him about what law was to be kept: 'Love God and your neighbor.' " For Menocchio this simplified religion didn't call for confessional restrictions. His impassioned exaltation of the equality of all religions was based on the idea that illumination was granted to all men in equal measure—"the majesty of God has given the Holy Spirit to all, to Christians, to heretics, to

Turks, and to Jews; and he considers them all dear, and they are all saved in the same manner." And he concluded with a violent outburst against his judges and their doctrinal arrogance: "You priests and monks, you too want to know more than God, and you are like the devil, and you want to become gods on earth, and know as much as God, following in the footsteps of the devil. In fact, the more one thinks he knows, the less he knows." And casting restraint and prudence aside, Menocchio declared that he rejected all the sacraments, including baptism, as human inventions, as "merchandise," instruments of exploitation and oppression in the hands of the clergy: "I believe that the law and commandments of the Church are all a matter of business, and they make their living from this." About baptism he said: "I believe that as soon as we are born we are baptized, because God who has blessed all things, has baptized us; but this other baptism is an invention, and priests begin to consume souls even before they are born and continue to devour them even after their death." On the subject of confirmation: "I believe it is a business, an invention of men, all of whom have the Holy Spirit; they seek to know and they know nothing." About marriage: "God did not establish it, men did. Formerly a man and a woman would exchange vows, and this sufficed; later these human inventions followed." About ordination: "I believe the spirit of God dwells in all of us . . . and I also believe that anyone who has studied can become a priest without being ordained, because it is all a business." About extreme unction: "I believe it is nothing, and is worth nothing, because it is the body that is anointed; the soul cannot be anointed." About confession he used to declare: "You might as well go and confess to a tree as to priests and monks." When the inquisitor questioned these words, Menocchio explained with a trace of complacency: "If that tree could give the knowledge of penance, it would be good enough; and if some men seek out priests because they do not know what penance has to be made for their sins in order that the priests may teach it to them, if they had understood this matter, there would be no need to go to them; and for those who already know it, it is useless." The latter should instead confess "to the majesty of God in their hearts, and beseech him to forgive their sins."

Only the sacrament of the altar escaped Menocchio's censure, but even that was reinterpreted in a heretical sense. The words reported by the witnesses sounded like blasphemies or disdainful condemnation. On a visit to the vicar of Polcenigo one day when the wafers were being made, Menocchio had exclaimed: "By the Virgin Mary, these are great beasts." And, on another occasion, while arguing with a priest, Andrea Bionima, he had said: "I do not see anything there but a piece of dough, how can this be our Lord God? And what is God anyway? Nothing but earth, water, and air." But to the vicar general he explained: "I did say that the host is a piece of dough, but I also said that the Holy Spirit descends into it from heaven, and I really believe this." And the vicar, incredulous, asked, "What do you believe the Holy Spirit to be?" Menocchio replied, "I believe it is God." But did he know how many persons were in the Trinity? "Yes sir, there are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." "Into which of these three persons do you think the host is changed?" "Into the Holy Spirit." "Precisely which person of the Holy Trinity do you believe to be in the host?" "I believe it is the Holy Spirit." Such ignorance seemed incredible to the vicar. "What did your parish priest say was in the most holy host when he preached about that most holy sacrament?" But it wasn't a matter of ignorance on Menocchio's part: "He said that it is the body of Christ, but I believed nevertheless it was the Holy Spirit, because I believe the Holy Spirit is greater than Christ, who was a man, whereas the Holy Spirit came from the hand of God." We can see that whenever he got the chance, Menocchio showed himself ready, almost insolently, to exercise his freedom of judgment, and his right to assume an independent stand. To the inquisitor he stated: "I like this about the sacrament, that after one has confessed, one goes to take communion, and receives the Holy Spirit, and one's spirit is joyful . . . ; as for the sacrament of the Eucharist, its function is to control men, made up by men through the Holy Spirit; and the celebration of the Mass is a device of the Holy Spirit, and similarly the adoration of the host, so that men will not be like beasts." Thus, the Mass and the sacrament of the altar were being justified from a point of view that was almost political, as civilizing instruments—in a sentence, however, that echoed involuntarily, but with the figures reversed, the remark made to the priest of Polcenigo ("hosts . . . beasts").

But on what did this radical criticism of the sacraments really rest? Certainly not on Scripture, which itself was subjected by Menocchio to a pitiless scrutiny and reduced to "four words" that constituted its essence: "I believe that sacred Scripture was given by God, but was afterward added to by men; only four words would suffice in this holy Scripture, but it is like the books about battles that grew and grew." For Menocchio even the Gospels, with their discrepancies, had lost touch with the brevity and simplicity of God's word: "As for the things in the Gospels, I believe that parts of them are true and parts were made up by the Evangelists out of their heads, as we see in the passages that one tells in one way and one in another way." Thus, we can understand how Menocchio could have said to his townsmen (and again in the course of the trial) that "Holy Scripture has been invented to deceive men." It was a refutation of doctrine, a

refutation even of the scriptural writings, a unilateral insistence on the practical aspect of religion. "[Menocchio] also told me that he only believed in good works," Francesco Fasseta had testified. On another occasion, still addressing himself to Francesco, Menocchio had exclaimed, "I do not want anything else but to do good." Sanctity for him was a way of life, practical behavior, nothing more: "I believe that saints were upright men who did good works, and because of this God made them saints and I think that they pray for us." Neither relics nor images should be venerated. "As for their relics, such as an arm, a body, a head, a hand, or a leg, I believe that they are like ours when they are dead, and we should not adore or revere them . . . we should not adore their images, but God alone who created heaven and earth; don't you see," exclaimed Menocchio to the judges, "that Abraham cast down all idols and images and adored only God?" Christ also, by his passion, had given men a model to live by: "He has been beneficial . . . for us Christians, serving as a mirror, and just as he was patient, suffering for love of us, we should die and suffer for love of him; let us not wonder that we also die, since God decreed that his son should die." But Christ was only a man, and all men are children of God, "of the very same nature as he who was crucified." Consequently, Menocchio refused to believe that Christ had died to redeem humanity: "If a person has sinned, it is he who must do penance."

Menocchio said most of these things in the course of a single, lengthy interrogation. "I would say enough to astonish everyone," he had promised the townsmen. And indeed, the inquisitor, the vicar general, and the mayor of Portogruaro must have been astonished at a miller who could expound his views with such assurance and force. Menocchio was convinced of their originality: "I have never associated with anyone who was a heretic," he said, responding to a specific question from the judges, "but I have an artful mind, and I have wanted to seek out higher things about which I did not know. But I do not believe that what I have said is the truth, and I want to be obedient to the Holy Church. And I have held opinions that were wicked, but the Holy Spirit has enlightened me, and I beg mercy of almighty God, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, and may he strike me dead if I am not telling the truth." At last, he had decided to follow the course advised by his son, but first he had wanted, as he had been promising himself for such a long time, "to speak out against his superiors for their evil deeds." Certainly he knew the risk he was taking. Before being conducted back to his cell he begged the inquisitors for mercy: "My lords, I beg you, by the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, to settle my case; and if I deserve death, send me to it; and if I deserve mercy, exercise it, because I want to live as a good Christian." But the trial was far from over. A few days later (1 May) the interrogations resumed. The mayor had to be absent from Portogruaro, but the judges were impatient to hear Menocchio again. "In the previous examination," the inquisitor said, "we told you that it appeared from the trial that your mind was filled with these humors and pernicious doctrines. Therefore, this holy tribunal desires that you finish opening your mind to us fully." And Menocchio: "My mind was lofty and wished for a new world and way of life, because the Church did not act properly, and because there should not be so much pomp."

7

We'll return later to the significance of the reference to "new world," and to a new "way of life." First we must try to understand how this miller of the Friuli could have expressed ideas of this kind.

The Friuli in the second half of the sixteenth century was a society with pronounced archaic features. The great families of the feudal nobility continued to exercise a dominant role in the region. Such institutions as the *masnada* form of serfdom had persisted until just the previous century, much longer than in neighboring areas. The ancient medieval parliament had preserved its proper legislative functions, even if actual power had been for some time in the hands of Venetian officials. In reality, Venetian rule, which had begun in 1420, had left things as they were as much as possible. The only concern of the Venetians had been to create a balance of power that would neutralize the subversive tendencies existing among some of the feudal nobility of the Friuli.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, conflicts within the nobility had intensified. Two parties had formed, the *Zamberlani,* who were favorable to Venice and had rallied around the powerful Antonio Savorgnan (who was later to die in exile in the imperial camp) and the *Strumieri,* who were hostile to Venice and were led by the family of the Torreggiani. An extremely violent class struggle added itself to the political conflict between the noble factions. As early as 1508 the nobleman Francesco di Strassoldo had warned in a speech in the *Parlamento* that in several areas of the Friuli the peasants had banded into "conventicles," some of them numbering as many as two thousand people. There, among other things, they uttered "certain nefarious and diabolical words, particularly about cutting to pieces priests, gentlemen,

feudal lords, and citizens, and even of holding a Sicilian Vesper and many other filthy words." And this wasn't idle talk. On Maundy Thursday 1511, shortly after the crisis ensuing from the Venetian defeat at Agnadello and coinciding with an outbreak of the plague, the peasants loyal to Savorgnan rebelled, first at Udine and later in other localities, slaughtering nobility of both parties and burning their castles. The immediate restoration of class solidarity among the nobles was followed by a ferocious repression of the revolt. But the violence of the peasants had on the one hand thrown fear into the Venetian oligarchy and on the other suggested the possibility of a daring policy of containment of the Friulian nobility. In the decades following the ephemeral uprising of 1511, the Venetian inclination to support the peasants of the Friuli (and those of the *Terraferma* in general) against the local nobility, grew stronger. As part of this system of counterweights, an extraordinary institution, the *Contadinanza,* came into being in the Venetian dominions themselves. This organ had both fiscal and military functions. It collected a series of tributes based on a so-called "list of hearths," and by means of "lots" organized local peasant militias. This second provision, in particular, was a real affront to the nobility of the Friuli when one recalls that the statutes of the *Patria,* so imbued with feudalistic spirit (among other things it threatened penalties for peasants who dared to obstruct the noble exercise of the hunt by snaring hares or hunting pheasants at night), contained a provision entitled *De prohibitione armorum rusticis.* But the Venetian authorities, while maintaining the peculiar characteristics of the *Contadinanza,* were also determined to make it the official representative of the interests of the rural population. Thus, the legal fiction that the *Parlamento* was the body representing the entire population was eventually dropped, even as a formality.

The list of measures taken by Venice in support of the peasants of the Friuli is a long one. Already in 1533, in response to a petition presented by the *decani* of Udine and other places in the Friuli and the Carnia who complained that they were "very oppressed by several types of rents paid to various noble citizens and others in the *Patria,* and to other lay persons, due to excessive prices prevailing on crops for several years," it was allowed that rents could be paid on the perpetual leases (excluding those held in emphyteusis) in cash rather than in kind—on the basis of unit prices established once and for all, which, at a time of severe inflation, obviously favored the peasants. In 1551 "in response to a plea from the peasantry of the *Patria,*" all perpetual leases dating from 1520 on were reduced 7 percent by an edict that was confirmed and amplified eight years later. Again, in 1574, the Venetian authorities attempted to restrain usury in the countryside by enjoining that "from the peasants of that *Patria* no large or small animals suitable for working the land are to be taken as security, nor any kind of farm implement, at the insistence of any creditor, except when offered by the owners themselves." In addition, "to alleviate the condition of the poor peasants, from whom, due to the greediness of the creditors who give them various things on credit, crops are snatched away almost before they are reaped, at a moment when the price is at the lowest point of the entire year," it was decreed that creditors could only make their claims after the 15th of August.

These concessions, which were intended primarily to keep latent tensions under control in the countryside of the Friuli, at the same time created a real sense of solidarity between the peasants and Venice against the local nobility. As a response to the continuing reduction of rents, the latter attempted to transform the long-term leases into simple rents, a type of contract that clearly made conditions worse for the peasants. This trend, which was widespread in this period, met heavy obstacles, especially of a demographic kind, in the Friuli. When manpower is short, it's difficult to make agricultural arrangements that favor the landlords. Within the space of a hundred years, between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, due to the effect of recurring plagues and to an increase in emigration, especially toward Venice, the total population of the Friuli declined. The reports of the Venetian officials of this period emphasize the miserable conditions of the peasants: "I have suspended all collections of private debts until the harvest," Daniele Priuli wrote in 1573, describing how, "everything is being taken, from clothing off women's backs, though they might be clutching their little ones, to the locks on the doors, things that are impious and inhuman." In 1587 Carlo Corner stressed the natural poverty of the *Patria:* "[It is] very barren since it is mountainous in part, gravelly in the lowlands, and prone to flooding from many streams and to damage from storms, which generally prevail in the area." And he concluded, "therefore since the nobles do not have great wealth, so also the people, especially the peasants, are very poor." At the end of the century (1599) Stefano Viaro painted a picture of decay and desolation: "For several years the *Patria* has been so devastated that there is scarcely a village where two-thirds, or even three-fourths, of its houses are not in ruins and uninhabited, and a little less than half its fields are uncultivated, really a very pitiful thing since, if this situation continues, every day the inhabitants are being forced out of necessity into leaving, only the poorest and most miserable will remain." At a time when the decline of Venice was beginning to become apparent, the economy of the Friuli was already in an advanced state of decay.

But what did a miller like Menocchio know of this tangle of political, social, and economic contradictions? What conception did he have of that enormous play of forces that was silently conditioning his existence?

His was a rudimentary and simplified image, but a very clear one just the same. Many grades of "rank" existed in the world. There were the pope, cardinals and bishops, and the parish priest of Montereale; there was the emperor, there were kings and princes. But beyond hierarchical gradations, there was a fundamental distinction between "superiors" and "poor people," and Menocchio knew that he was one of the poor. It was a totally dichotomous view of the class structure, typical of a peasant society. Nevertheless, in Menocchio's statements there's an indication of a more discriminating attitude concerning "superiors." The violence of his attack against the highest religious authorities—"and it seems to me that under this law of ours the pope, cardinals, and bishops are so great and rich that everything belongs to the Church and to the priests, and they oppress the poor . . . "—contrasts with the much milder criticism of political authorities that follows immediately after: "It also seems to me that these Venetian lords harbor thieves in that city, so that when a person goes there to buy something, and asks 'How much do you want for these things?' they reply a ducat, even if they are only worth three *marcelli;* and I wish that they would do their duty. . . . " These words testify, first of all, to the reaction of the peasant who has suddenly come into contact with the distant reality of the city. The jump from Montereale or Aviano to a great city like Venice was a big one. But the fact remains that while the pope, cardinals, and bishops are directly accused of "oppressing" the poor, he says simply of the "Venetian lords" that "they harbor thieves in that city." This difference in tone certainly can't be attributed to prudence, for when he spoke these words Menocchio was standing before both the mayor of Portogruaro and the inquisitor of Aquileia and his vicar. In his eyes the ecclesiastical hierarchy was the principal embodiment of oppression. Why?

Menocchio himself seems to provide the first clue: "Everything belongs to the Church and to the priests, and they oppress the poor, who, if they work two rented fields, these will be fields that belong to the Church, to some bishop or cardinal." As we've said, we don't know if this was also the case with Menocchio himself. From an assessment made in 1596—twelve years after these statements—it appears that one of the fields presumably leased to Menocchio bordered a tract of land that a member of the local seigneurial family, Orazio di Montereale, had allocated to a ser Giacomo Margnano. The document also lists several pieces of land owned by local or neighboring churches and let out on lease: eight belonged to Santa Maria, one to San Rocco (both of Montereale), and one to Santa Maria of Pordenone. Montereale certainly wasn't an isolated case. At the end of the sixteenth century, the amount of property held by the Church in the Friuli, as in the entire Veneto, was still extensive. And where it had decreased quantitatively, it had increased and improved in quality. All this suffices to explain Menocchio's words, even if he had not personally experienced the oppressive effects of Church ownership of land (which had always been explicitly exempted from the reduction in rents introduced by the Venetian authorities). He had only to open his eyes and look around.

The extent of ecclesiastical property in Montereale and vicinity explains the bitterness of Menocchio's accusations but not their implications, nor their application on a more general level. The pope, cardinals, and bishops "oppress" the poor. But in whose name? With what right? The pope "is a man like us" except for the fact that he has power ("puo' far") and thus has greater "rank." No difference existed between clergy and laity. The sacrament of ordination was "a business." All the sacraments and laws of the Church, for that matter, were "merchandise," "inventions" upon which the priests grew fat. Against this enormous edifice built on the exploitation of the poor, Menocchio set forth a very different religion, where all members were equal because the spirit of God was in all of them.

Menocchio's awareness of his own rights, then, had specifically religious origins. A miller may claim to be able to expound the truths of the faith to the pope, to a king, to a prince, because he has within himself that spirit which God has imparted to all men. For the same reason he may dare "to speak out against his superiors about their evil deeds." What led Menocchio to denouce the existing hierarchies so impetuously in his speeches wasn't only his perception of the oppression, but also a religiosity that affirmed the presence in every man of a "spirit" that he sometimes called "Holy Spirit," sometimes "spirit of God."

It would seem, even at first glance, that all this can be explained by the great blow dealt to the principle of authority by the Protestant Reformation, not only in the area of religion but also in the political and social realms. But what was Menocchio's connection with Reformation groups and their ideas?

"I believe a Lutheran is one who goes about teaching bad things, and eats meat on Friday and Saturday," Menocchio at one point told the judges who were interrogating him. But this was certainly an intentionally simplified and distorted definition. Many years later, at the time of the second trial (1599), it came out that Menocchio had said to a converted Jew named Simon, that at his own death "some Lutherans will learn of it, and will come to collect the ashes." At first glance this would seem to be solid evidence. Actually, it's just the opposite. Apart from the difficulty of evaluating the grounds for Menocchio's expectations (to which we shall return), the term "Lutheran" is in a context that confirms the general way with which it was used in this period. According to Simon, in fact, Menocchio had denied all value to the Gospel, had rejected the divinity of Christ, and had praised a book that may have been the Koran. We would appear to be very far from Luther and his doctrines. All this compels us to return to the point of departure and begin again, proceeding cautiously one step at a time.

What may be called Menocchio's ecclesiology, which we can reconstruct on the basis of statements he made during the interrogations in Portogruaro, has relatively precise features. In the complex religious picture of sixteenth-century Europe, in several respects it resembles chiefly the teachings of the Anabaptists. Insistence on the simplicity of the word of God, rejection of sacred images, ceremonies, and the sacraments, the denial of Christ's divinity, the adherence to a practical religion based on works, the polemic with the stamp of pauperism against ecclesiastical "pomp," the exaltation of tolerance, are all elements that can be traced to the religious radicalism of the Anabaptists. Granted, Menocchio doesn't appear to have been a supporter of adult baptism. But we know that it wasn't long before Italian Anabaptist groups reached the point of refusing baptism as well as the other sacraments, accepting at the very most a spiritual baptism based on the inner regeneration of the individual. For his part, Menocchio considered baptism totally useless: "I believe that as soon as we are born, we are baptized, because God who has blessed all things has baptized us. . . . "

After having spread through a large part of northern and central Italy, especially the Veneto, the Anabaptist movement was broken in mid-after the defection of one of its leaders. But a few dispersed conventicles survived clandestinely for some time even in the Friuli. For example, those artisans of Porcia imprisoned by the Holy Office in 1557, who had been accustomed to meeting in the houses of a tanner and of a weaver to read Scripture and to discuss "the renewal of life, . . . the purity of the Gospel, and abstention from sins," could have been Anabaptists. As we'll see, Menocchio, whose heretical beliefs, according to a witness, went back thirty years, may have been in contact with this very group.

Nevertheless, despite the similarities that have been noted, it doesn't seem possible to label Menocchio an Anabaptist. His favorable opinion of the Mass, the Eucharist, and, within limits, confession, would have been unthinkable in an Anabaptist. Above all, an Anabaptist who viewed the pope as the incarnation of the Antichrist could never have spoken about indulgences as did Menocchio: "I believe that they are good, because if God has put a man in his place as pope to grant a pardon, that is good, because it is as if we are receiving it from God since these indulgences are given by one who is acting as his steward." All this emerged during the first interrogation at Portogruaro (28 April). The proud, sometimes haughty, posture assumed by Menocchio on that occasion again suggests that we can discard straightaway the hypothesis that such statements were dictated either by caution or by calculation. Moreover, the variety of texts that Menocchio later identified as the "sources" of his religious beliefs is as far removed as one can imagine from the rigid sectarian exclusiveness of the Anabaptists. For the latter, the only source of truth was Scripture, or even simply the Gospels. For example, the weaver who was a leader of the above-mentioned Porcia group declared, "aside from this no other writing is to be believed, and in no other writing but the Gospels is there anything that pertains to salvation." For Menocchio, instead, inspiration could come from the most disparate books: as much from the *Fioretto della Bibbia* as from the *Decameron*. In conclusion, there were real similarities between the views of Menocchio and those of the Anabaptists, but they were set in clearly different contexts.

If Anabaptism alone doesn't explain the case of Menocchio, wouldn't it be advisable to fall back on a more general definition? Apparently Menocchio declared that he was in contact with "Lutheran" groups (a term that at the time included an extremely broad area of heterodoxy). Why not settle for this vague kinship that we earlier recognized as possibly having existed between Menocchio and the Reformation?

Actually, even this hardly seems possible. At one point a typical exchange took place between the inquisitor and Menocchio. The former

always so ready to expound his "opinions" at length, this time didn't understand. The monk had to explain to him *"quid sit iustificatio,"* and Menocchio replied, as we've seen, denying that Christ had died to save mankind since, "if a person has sinned, it is he who must do penance." It was the same with predestination. Menocchio didn't know the meaning of this word, and only after the inquisitor's explanation did he reply, "I do not believe that God has predestined anyone to eternal life." Justification and predestination, the two themes around which religious debate revolved in Italy in the age of the Reformation, literally meant nothing to this miller of the Friuli—even if, as we shall see, he had encountered them at least once in the course of his readings.

This is even more significant since interest in these questions in Italy was not limited to the upper classes of society.

> The porter, the maidservant, and the bondsman
> dissect free will
> and make hash of predestination,

the satirical poet Pietro Nelli, alias Messer Andrea da Bergamo, wrote in mid-sixteenth century. A few years earlier, Neapolitan tanners had passionately argued over the epistles of St. Paul and the doctrine of justification after listening to the sermons of Bernardino Ochino. An echo of the debates concerning the importance of faith and works for salvation turns up in the most unexpected quarters, for example, in a prostitute's appeal to Milanese authorities. These are random examples to which we could easily add. Nevertheless, there is a common element among them: almost all have an urban setting. It is one indication, among many, of the growing separation in Italy between the city and the country. The religious conquest of Italian rural areas, which the Anabaptists might have attempted if they had not been crushed almost at once by political and religious repression, was achieved a few decades later under a quite different banner by the religious orders of the Counter-Reformation, principally the Jesuits.

This doesn't mean that the Italian countryside failed to experience religious unrest during the sixteenth century. But behind this thin fabric of themes and issues of contemporary events one glimpses the massive presence of different and much more ancient traditions. 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.

10

It seemed impossible to the inquisitors that Menocchio, uninfluenced, should have formulated ideas so different from current ones. Witnesses were asked if Menocchio "had spoken sincerely or in mockery, or whether he was repeating what he heard other people saying." Menocchio was asked to give the names of his "companions." But the replies in both cases were negative. Menocchio, in particular, declared decisively, "Sir, I have never met anyone who holds these opinions; my opinions came out of my own head." But, in part at least, he was not telling the truth. In 1598 don Ottavio Montereale (who, as we remember, had been indirectly responsible for the intervention of the Holy Office) said that he had understood "this Menocchio learned his heresies from a M. Nicola, a painter of Porcia" who had gone to Montereale to paint in the home of a signor de Lazzari, don Ottavio's brother-in-law. Actually, Nicola's name had emerged even during the first trial, provoking a visibly embarrassed reaction from Menocchio. First he related having met him during Lent, when he had heard Nicola declare that indeed he was fasting, but "out of fear." (Menocchio instead had been consuming "a little bit of milk, cheese, and an occasional egg," excusing himself by the weakness of his constitution.) But immediately afterward, changing the subject, he began to speak in what seemed to be a distracted way of a book that Nicola owned. Nicola had been called in turn before the Holy Office but was released immediately following favorable testimony as to his character given by two ecclesiastics of Porcia. In the second trial, however, evidence emerged concerning the influence on Menocchio's heterodox opinions by an unknown person. During the interrogation of the 19th of July 1599, the inquisitors asked him how long he had believed—on the basis of a

novella from the *Decameron*, as we shall see—that every man could be saved through his own religion, and accordingly, that a Turk was right to remain a Turk and not be converted to Christianity. Menocchio replied, "It may be fifteen or sixteen years that I have held these opinions, since we began to discuss such things, and the devil put them in my head." "With whom did you discuss this?" the inquisitor immediately asked. Only after a long pause *("post longam moram")* did Menocchio reply, "I don't know."

It seems, then, that Menocchio must have spoken with someone about religion fifteen or sixteen years before–in 1583, probably, because at the beginning of the following year he had been imprisoned and tried. In all probability it was the same person who had lent Menocchio the incriminated book, the *Decameron.* Menocchio named him a couple of weeks later: Nicola de Melchiori. In addition to the name, the dates (coincidences that escaped the inquisitors) lead us to identify this person with Nicola da Porcía, whom in 1584, Menocchio had not seen for precisely a year.

Don Ottavio Montereale was well informed: Menocchio must actually have discussed religious questions with Nicola da Porcía. We don't know if Nicola had been part of the group of artisans who gathered to read the Gospel more than twenty-five years before. In any case, despite the statements obtained in his favor in 1584, he had been known for some time as "a great heretic." At least this is the way he had been described in 1571 by a nobleman of Pordenone, Fulvio Rorario, in reference to an event of eight or ten years before. Nicola "said that he had personally broken some tablets that had been placed as a decoration in a church not far from Porcía, declaring it was wrong, and that they did not belong there and were . . . merchandise . . . and that figures should not be placed in church." Menocchio's sharp condemnation of sacred images immediately comes to mind. But this wasn't all he learned from Nicola da Porcía.

"I know," said Menocchio to the vicar general "that [Nicola] had a book called *Zampollo*, a buffoon, according to him, who died and went to hell and joked with the demons there; and if I remember he said that he was with a companion, and that a demon had taken a liking to the buffoon, and when his companion learned that the demon was fond of the buffoon he said to him that he should pretend to be unhappy; and as he was doing this, the demon said to him: 'Why do you look unhappy? Speak honestly, regardless, because one should be honorable even in hell.' " To the vicar general this speech must have sounded like a lot of foolishness. He immediately brought the interrogation back to more serious questions—for example, had Menocchio ever asserted that all men go to hell?—thereby allowing an important lead to slip by. In fact, Menocchio had absorbed the book that Nicola da Porcía had given him to read to the point where he had permanently assimilated its themes and expressions, even if mistakenly he had substituted a perversion of the name of the protagonist, Zanpolo, for the title, *Il sogno dil Caravia.*

In the *Sogno* the Venetian jeweler, Alessandro Caravia, portrays himself and the celebrated buffoon Zanpolo Liompardi, his close friend, who had died a short time before at a great age.

> You appear to me to be *melancholia*
> Depicted by a good master painter,

Zanpolo says at the beginning to Caravia (who, in fact, in an engraving on the title page is represented in the pose of Dürer's *Melancholia)*. Caravia is sad. He sees about him a world filled with injustice and is grieved by it. Zanpolo comforts him, and reminds him that the true life is not on this earth.

> Oh how dearly I should love to have news
> Of someone who is in the other world,

exclaims Caravia. Zanpolo promises that after his death he will try to return and appear before him. He dies shortly after; most of the verses of the poem describe the jeweler's dream in which Zanpolo, the buffoon, relates his journey to paradise where he converses with St. Peter, and to hell where, through his clowning, he first forms a friendship with the devil, Farfarello, and later meets another famous buffoon, Domenego Taiacalze. The latter suggests a plan that will enable Zanpolo to appear before Caravia, as he had promised:

> I know that Farfarel loves you very much
> And soon I think will come to visit you;
> He will ask you if you feel great misery:
> You, when you see him, must pretend to be
> More unhappy than you really are,
> And he will try to please you.
> Then you will tell him what you are thinking
> And perhaps he will do everything your heart desires.

"Then I pretended . . . " Zanpolo relates,

> To be in great torment
> And sat myself down in a corner
> Before Farfarel should come upon me.

But the ruse didn't work, and Farfarello scolds him:

> I've seen through your pretense:
> My mind is now confused about you

Because you tried such a trick on me.
I had your promise to obey every commandment
And to keep the faith even in hell.

Nevertheless, he forgives him. Zanpolo appears to Caravia, who upon awakening, offers a prayer on his knees before the crucifix.

Farfarello's exhortations to tell the truth even in hell, which Menocchio seized upon, certainly represent one of the fundamental themes in the *Sogno,* namely, the polemic against hypocrisy, especially that of monks. Its printing was concluded in May 1541, while the colloquies that seemed destined to restore religious peace between Catholics and Protestants were taking place in Regensburg. The *Sogno* is, in fact, a typical voice of Italian evangelism. The "*sgnieffi, berleffi, ceffi,* and twisted faces" of the two buffoons Zanpolo and Taiacalze, who began to dance even in front of Beelzebub's tribunal, "showing him their naked buttocks," in fact accompany—and the mixture is carnivalesque—a broad and persistent religious discourse. Taiacalze openly praises Luther:

A certain Martin Luther has been turned up
Who esteems priests little and monks less
And is by the Germans much beloved;
He never tires of calling for a council [. . .]
This Martin, from what we hear,
Excells in all branches of learning:
He abandons not the pure Gospel.
Luther has confused the minds of many;
One says that only Christ can pardon us,
Another that Paul III and Clement may.
There are those who pull and those who yield,
Who speak the truth, who lie through their teeth.
All desire that the council take place
Only to clarify these heresies now:
The hot sun melts the snow,
So may God any evil thought . . .

Altogether, Luther's position is judged favorably since he calls for a council to restore doctrinal clarity and he reasserts the "pure Gospel":

Unwillingly did I see death come
For me, friend, since I was not clear
On the different opinions arisen in great number
Each unsteadily holding sway in the world.
Men would like to remain steadfast in their faith
And not be confused by empty words
But to read well in the Gospels' text
And not care about Martin for the rest.

What is meant by "the pure Gospel" is explained later, in turn by Zanpolo, St. Peter, and Taiacalze. There is, in the first place, justification by faith in Christ's sacrifice:

The first cause that saves the Christian
Is to love God and have faith only in him.
The second, to hope that the human Christ
By his blood saves whoever believes in him.
The third, to keep the heart sound by charity.
And to act in the light of the Holy Spirit, if he wishes
To obtain reward from the only God in three Persons.
Together these three save you from hell.

No theological subtleties here, such as those preached by monks, that had become fashionable even among the unlearned.

Many fools who think themselves scholars
Speak constantly of Holy Scripture,
Barbers, smiths, and tailors,
Theologizing beyond measure,
Causing people to fall into many errors,
About predestination they are really frightening
Concerning the judgment, and free will too.
Let them be burned by the powder of saltpeter.
It would be enough for these small artisans
To believe in the Creed, and say Our Father
And not commit a thousand errors against the faith
Searching for things that were never written
With ink, nor with sharpened pen.
The Evangelists have shown the way
Right and simple, for him who wishes to go to Heaven.
One need not, Zanpol, be so subtle
As to see the membrane of an egg inside the hen [. . .]
Oh how many friars, who know next to nothing
Use their minds to confuse
This poor wretch and that one.
Know that they would do better to preach
The pure Gospel and leave the rest alone.

The clear-cut contrast between a religion reduced to an essential core on the one hand and theological subtleties on the other recalls statements by Menocchio—who, even though he had read in this passage a word like "predestination," actually said he didn't know its meaning. Still more definite is the similarity between the condemnation of the "laws and commandments of the Church" as "merchandise" (*mercantie,* a term used, as we saw, also by Nicola da Porcía) and the invective against priests and monks that the *Sogno* puts in the mouth of St. Peter:

They make a business of burying the dead
As though they were a sack of wool, or peppercorns:
In these matters they are very shrewd
In not wanting to receive the deceased
If first the money is not delivered into their hands;
Then they go to eat and drink it up
Laughing about those who made such payments
And enjoying good beds and heavy-laden boards.
Business of even greater importance
They make of the Church that was mine,
Among themselves drawing in every abundance
Not bothering about those who go without.
In my opinion this is an evil practice
To turn my Church into a marketplace
And to think blessed he who has more benefices
And yet says few masses, and fewer offices still.

There's an implicit denial of purgatory and thus of the utility of Masses for the dead; condemnation of the use of Latin by priests and monks ("Purposefully they perform all their ceremonies/If only they would speak to you in the vernacular, and not in Latin"); rejection of "sumptuous churches"; limitations on the cult of saints:

Saints should be honored, my son,
Because they have taken their precepts from Christ [. . .]
Whoever does as they do, it is God's desire
That they dwell with him in the heaven of the elect:
But he does not dispense their grace,
And who believes that makes a mistake.

And about confession:

Every faithful Christian should confess
With his mind and heart every hour before God
And not only once at the New Year
Just to show that he is not a Jew.

These are all recurring motifs, as we've seen, in Menocchio's statements. And yet he had read the *Sogno* more than forty years after its publication, in a completely different situation. The council that should have healed the conflict between "the papists" and Luther—a conflict that Caravia compared to that between the two Friulian factions of the *Strumieri* and the *Zamberlani*—had indeed taken place, but it had been a council of condemnations and not of concord. For men like Caravia, the Church outlined by the Tridentine decrees was certainly not the Church "made straight" and based on the "pure Gospel" about which they had dreamed. And even Menocchio must have read the *Sogno* as a book that on many counts was tied to an age long since passed. Of course, the anticlerical or antitheological polemics still had a contemporary ring, for reasons that we have already seen: but the more radical elements of Menocchio's religion went well beyond the *Sogno*. In the latter there was no trace of a denial of Christ's divinity, of the rejection of the integrity of Scripture, of the condemnation of baptism (although it was defined as "merchandise"), nor of the indiscriminate exaltation of tolerance. Had it been Nicola da Porcia who had spoken to Menocchio about all this? In regard to tolerance, apparently, yes—if the identification of Nicola de Melchiori with Nicola da Porcia is correct. But all the evidence furnished by the inhabitants of Montereale indicates that the complex of Menocchio's ideas had formed long before the date of the first trial. It's true that we don't know how far back his relations with Nicola went: but Menocchio's obstinacy demonstrates that we aren't dealing with a passive reception of someone else's ideas.

11

"Would you like me to teach you the true way? Try to do good and walk in the path of my ancestors, and follow what Holy Mother Church commands": These were the words, as we recall, that Menocchio maintained (although he was probably lying) he had spoken to his fellow villagers. In fact, Menocchio had taught exactly the opposite: disassociation from the faith of one's forefathers, rejection of the doctrines preached by the priest from the pulpit. Maintaining this deviant position for such a long time (perhaps for almost thirty years), first in such a small community as Montereale and later before the tribunal of the Holy Office, called for moral and intellectual strength that can be described as nothing less than extraordinary. The diffidence of his relatives and friends, the reproaches of the priest, the threats of the inquisitors, none had succeeded in shaking Menocchio's self-confidence. But what made him so sure of himself? With what authority was he speaking?

In the early exchanges of the trial he ascribed his opinions to diabolical inspiration: "I uttered those words because I was tempted . . . it was the evil spirit that made me believe those things." But he had already become less submissive by the end of the first interrogation: "What I said came either through the inspiration of God or of the devil. . . . " Fifteen days later he added yet another possibility: "The devil or something tempted me." Shortly after, he clarified what this "something" was that nagged at him: "My opinions came out of my head." Thereafter he

deviated from this idea during the entire course of the first trial. Even when he decided to ask his judges to forgive him, he attributed his errors to his own "artful mind."

So, Menocchio was not claiming special revelations or illumination. It was to his own intelligence that he gave the chief credit. This alone was enough to distinguish him from the prophets, visionaries, and itinerant preachers who had proclaimed obscure revelations in the public squares of Italian cities between the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries. Even as late as 1550, a former Benedictine, Giorgio Siculo, had tried to communicate to the fathers assembled at the Council of Trent truths that Christ himself, appearing "in his own person," had revealed to him. But by the time of Menocchio's trial, twenty years had passed since the Council had ended. The hierarchy had spoken and the long period of uncertainty about what the faithful could and should believe was over. And yet this miller lost in the hills of the Friuli continued to mull over "exalted things," opposing his own religious views to the decrees of the Church: "I believe . . . according to what I think and believe. . . . "

In addition to his own reason, there were books. The *Sogno dil Caravia* was not an isolated case. "On confessing several times to a priest of Barcis," Menocchio declared during his first interrogation, "I said to him, 'Can it be that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary?' I added, however, that I believed this, but sometimes the devil tempted me." The attribution of his own doubts to demoniacal temptation reflected Menocchio's relatively cautious attitude at the beginning of the trial; in fact, he promptly expounded the two premises supporting his position: "I based my belief on the fact that many men have been born into the world, but none of a virgin woman; and when I read that the glorious Virgin was married to St. Joseph, I believed that our Lord Jesus Christ was the son of St. Joseph, because I have read some histories where St. Joseph called our Lord Jesus Christ his son, and I read this in a book called *Il Fioreto della Bibia.*" This is an example chosen at random; Menocchio frequently indicated that this or that book was the source (not the only one in this particular case) of his "opinions." But what had Menocchio actually read?

12

Unfortunately, we don't have a complete list of his books. At the few volumes were found, but since they were neither suspected nor prohibited, they weren't inventoried. We can reconstruct a partial picture of Menocchio's readings only on the basis of the brief references that he made during the interrogations. The following books were mentioned during the first trial:

1. The Bible in the vernacular, "a large part of it in red letters" (an unidentified edition);
2. *Il Fioretto della Bibbia* (the translation of a medieval Catalan chronicle compiled from various sources among which were, besides the Vulgate of course, the *Chronicon* of Isidore, the *Elucidarium* of Honorius of Autun, and several apocryphal gospels; of this work, which circulated widely in manuscript between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we know of twenty-odd editions variously entitled *Fioretto della Bibbia, Fiore di tutta la Bibbia, Fiore novello,* reprinted until mid-sixteenth century);
3. *Il Lucidario* (or *Rosario?) della Madonna* (probably to be identified with the *Rosario della Gloriosa Vergine Maria,* by the Dominican Albert da Castello, which also was frequently reprinted in the sixteenth century);
4. *Il Lucendario (sic,* for *Legendario) de santi* (the translation of the widely diffused *Legenda aurea* by Jacopo da Voragine, edited by Niccolò Malermi, which appeared under the title *Legendario delle vite de tutti li santi);*
5. *Historia del giudicio* (an anonymous fifteenth-century poem in *ottava rima* that circulated in numerous versions of varying length);
6. *Il cavallier Zuanne de Mandavilla* (the Italian translation of the famous book of travels written in the mid-fourteenth century and attributed to a Sir John Mandeville, reprinted many times throughout the sixteenth century);
7. "A book called *Zampollo*" (actually *Il sogno dil Caravia,* printed in Venice in 1541).

To these titles should be added others mentioned in the second trial:

8. *Il supplimento delle cronache* (the vernacular translation of the chronicle compiled by the Augustinian of Bergamo, Jacopo Filippo Foresti, at the end of the fifteenth century. It was reprinted and enlarged many times until the late sixteenth century with the title *Supplementum supplementi delle croniche . . .);*
9. *Lunario al modo di Italia calculato composto nella città di Pesaro dal ecc. mo dottore Marino Camilo de Leonardis* (many reprintings are known of this also);
10. the *Decameron* of Boccaccio in an unexpurgated edition;

11. an unidentified book that a witness supposed was the Koran (an Italian translation had appeared in Venice in 1547).

13

First of all, let's see how Menocchio managed to get hold of these books. The only one that we are certain was purchased is the *Fioretto della Bibbia,* "which," Menocchio said, "I bought in Venice for 2 soldi." We have no information about three others—the *Historia del Giudicio,* the *Lunario,* and the presumed Koran. Foresti's *Supplementum* was given to Menocchio as a gift by Tomaso Mero da Malmins. All the rest—six out of eleven, more than half—were loaned to him. These are important facts that permit us to perceive in this tiny community a network of readers who overcame the obstacle of their meager financial resources by passing books to one another. The *Lucidario* (or *Rosario) della Madonna* was loaned to Menocchio by a woman, Anna de Cecho, during his exile at Arba in 1564. Her son, Giorgio Capel, when summoned to testify (his mother had died), said that he had a book entitled *La vita de santi;* other books of his had been confiscated by the priest of Arba, who returned only two or three to him declaring that they (the inquisitors, evidently) "will want to burn the rest." The Bible and the *Legendario de santi* had been loaned to Menocchio by his uncle, Domenico Gerbas, but since the *Legendario* "had become wet, it tore." The Bible, instead, ended up in the hands of Bastian Scandella from whom Menocchio, who was his cousin, borrowed it from time to time. Six or seven months before the trial, however, Bastian's wife, Fior, had taken the Bible and had burned it in the oven: "But it was a sin to have burned that book!" Menocchio exclaimed. The Mandeville had been loaned to him five or six years before by the priest Andrea Bionima, curate of Montereale, who had discovered it by chance at Maniago while going through "some notarial documents." (At any rate, Bionima prudently stated that he had not been the one to give Menocchio the book, but rather that it was Vincenzo Lombardo, who knew "how to read a little" and must have taken it home.) The *Sogno dil Caravia* had been loaned to Menocchio by Nicola da Porcía, who may be identified perhaps, as we have seen, with that Nicola de Melchiori from whom he had received the *Decameron* through Lunardo della Minussa of Montereale. Menocchio, in turn, had loaned the *Fioretto* to a young man of Barcis, Tita Coradina, who claimed that he had read only one page of it. Then the priest told him that it was a forbidden book and he burned it.

It was a lively network involving not only priests (which was foreseeable) but women as well. We know that in Udine, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, a school was opened under the direction of Girolamo Amaseo, "for reading and teaching, without exception, children of citizens as well as those of artisans and the lower classes, old as well as young, without any set payment." Elementary schools, where even a little Latin was taught, also existed in such places as Aviano and Pordenone not far from Montereale. Just the same, it's astonishing that so much reading went on in this small town in the hills. Unfortunately, only rarely are we provided with information that permits us to identify the social position of these readers. We have already mentioned the painter Nicola da Porcía. Menocchio's cousin, Bastian Scandella, appears in the 1596 assessment mentioned above as a person who held (but we don't know in what capacity) many sections of land; he was also the mayor of Montereale in the same year. But almost all the others are just names. It seems to be clear, at any rate, that books were part of daily life for these people. They were objects to be used, treated without excessive regard, sometimes exposed to the dangers of water and tearing. Significant, however, is Menocchio's scandalized reaction over the Bible that finished in the fire (undoubtedly so that it would not be found in a possible search by the Holy Office). In spite of his ironic comparison of Scripture with "the books of battle that grew and grew," to him the former was a book different from all others because it contained an essential element provided by God.

14

The fact that more than half the books mentioned by Menocchio had been borrowed should be kept in mind in analyzing the contents of this list. Only for the *Fioretto della Bibbia,* in fact, can we claim with certainty that it was a real and actual choice on Menocchio's part that had led him to buy precisely *that* book out of the many gathered in the shop or stall of the unknown Venetian bookseller. It is of significance, as we shall see, that for him the *Fioretto* had been a sort of bedside book, a *livre de chevet.* On the other hand, chance alone had led the priest Andrea Bionima to stumble upon the Mandeville volume among the "notarial papers" in Maniago; and an indiscriminate appetite for reading matter, rather than a particular

interest, must have brought it into Menocchio's hands. This is probably also the case with all the books borrowed from the other villagers. The list that we have reconstructed reflects chiefly the books Menocchio might have had at his disposal, but certainly not a picture of intentional preferences and choices.

Furthermore, it's an incomplete list. This explains, for example, the prevalence of religious texts: six out of the eleven. It's natural that during his two trials Menocchio should refer above all to readings of this type to justify his own ideas. A complete list of the books he had either possessed or read probably would have presented a more varied picture and would have included, for example, some of those "books of battle" that he had provocatively compared to the Bible—perhaps the *Libro che tratta di bataglia, chiamato Fioravante* (Venice, 1506) or one similar to it. But even this handful of titles, fragmentary and one-sided as it may be, permits a certain amount of discussion. Besides Scripture there are works of piety, versions of Scripture in verse and prose, saints' lives, an almanac, a semi-comical poem, a book of travels, a chronicle, a collection of stories (the *Decameron*): all vernacular texts (we've said that Menocchio knew little more Latin than what he had learned serving Mass) composed two or three centuries before that were widely diffused and read by people of various social levels. The Foresti and the Mandeville, for example, had also been in the library of another, very different "unlettered man" ("omo sanza lettere"), in other words, one almost totally ignorant of Latin, namely, Leonardo da Vinci. And the *Historia del Giudicio* appears among the books owned by the famous naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (who, incidentally, had had dealings with the Inquisition for his association with heretical groups in his youth). Certainly, the Koran (if Menocchio really did read it) stands out on this list: but it's an exception that we'll consider separately. The rest are fairly obvious titles that appear incapable of shedding light on how Menocchio had happened to formulate what one of his fellow villagers called "fantastic opinions."

15

Once again we have the impression of being in a blind alley. Earlier, faced by Menocchio's extravagant cosmogony, we stopped to ask ourselves just as the vicar general had, whether this was not the talk of a madman. After discarding this hypothesis, the examination of his ecclesiology suggested another, that Menocchio might have been an Anabaptist. Rejecting this as well we confronted the problem of his ties to the Reformation, on the basis of the information that Menocchio considered himself a "Lutheran" martyr. However, the attempt to fit Menocchio's ideas and beliefs within a deeply-rooted current of peasant radicalism brought to the surface by the Reformation (but independent of it) now seems to be emphatically contradicted by the list of readings we've reconstructed from the trial records. To what extent can we consider as typical such an unusual figure as that of a sixteenth-century miller who knew how to read and write? And typical of what? Certainly not of a current in peasant culture, seeing that Menocchio himself pointed to a group of printed books as sources for his ideas. By dint of running up against the walls of this labyrinth, we've returned to the point of departure.

Almost, that is. We have seen what books Menocchio read. But how did he read them?

When we compare, one by one, passages from the books mentioned by Menocchio with the conclusions that he drew from them (if not with the manner in which he reported them to the judges), we invariably find gaps and discrepancies of serious proportions. Any attempt to consider these books as "sources" in the mechanical sense of the term collapses before the aggressive originality of Menocchio's reading. 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 its 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.

This doesn't mean that for Menocchio the book was incidental, or a pretext. He himself declared, as we shall see, that at least one book had moved him deeply, encouraging him to think new thoughts by its startling assertions. It was the encounter between the printed page and the oral culture, of which he was one embodiment, that led Menocchio to formulate—first for himself, later for his fellow villagers, and finally for the judges—the "opinions . . . [that] came out of *his* head."

16

We might illustrate Menocchio's manner of reading by a series of examples of progressively increasing complexity. In the first interrogation he repeated that Christ had been a man like all other men, born of St. Joseph and the Virgin Mary. And he explained that Mary "was called a Virgin, having been in the temple of the virgins, because there was a temple where twelve virgins were kept, and as they grew up they were married off, and I read this in a book called the *Lucidario della Madonna.*" This book, which he called the *Rosario* elsewhere, was probably the *Rosario della gloriosa Vergine Maria* by the Dominican Alberto da Castello. Menocchio would have been able to read in it: "Contemplate here zealous soul, how after making an offering to God and to the priest, St. Joachim and St. Anne left their most precious daughter in the temple of God, where she was to be cared for with the other virgins who had been dedicated to God. In that place she dwelt in sublime devotion contemplating divine things, and she was visited by the Holy Angels, as though she were their queen and empress, and she was always engaged in prayer."

What may have led Menocchio to pause over this page in the *Rosario* was the fact that he had frequently seen the scenes of Mary at the temple and of Joseph with the pretenders in frescoes executed in 1566 by a follower of Pordenone, Calderari, on the walls of the church of St. Rocco in Montereale. In any case, he changed the significance without actually distorting the literal meaning. In the text, the appearance of the angels set Mary apart from her companions, conferring a supernatural aura upon her. But in Menocchio's mind, the significant element was the presence of "the other virgins," which explained in the simplest manner the title given to Mary by linking her with her companions. Thus, what was originally a detail ended by becoming the central issue, thereby altering the general sense.

17

At the end of the interrogation held on 28 April, after having, without restraint, poured out his accusations against the Church, priests, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical ceremonies, Menocchio declared, in reply to a question by the inquisitor: "I believe that in this world the empress was greater than the Madonna, but in the hereafter the Madonna is greater, because there we are invisible." The inquisitor's question originated in an episode reported by a witness that Menocchio promptly confirmed: "Yes sir, it is true that when the empress passed by I said that she was greater than the Madonna, but I meant in this world; and in that book about the Madonna many honors were neither given nor paid to her and, in fact, when she was brought to be buried she was treated with dishonor, because someone wanted to pull her off the shoulders of the apostles, and he remained attached to her by his hands, and this was in the life of the Madonna."

To what text was Menocchio referring? The expression "book of the Madonna" again might suggest the *Rosario della gloriosa Vergine Maria:* but the reference doesn't fit. Instead, the passage occurs in another book read by Menocchio, the *Legendario delle vite de tutti li santi* by Jacopo da Voragine, in the chapter entitled "On the Assumption of the blessed Virgin Mary," which is a revision of "a certain apocryphal booklet ascribed to blessed John the Evangelist." This is Voragine's description of Mary's last rites:

> And the angels and the apostles were singing and filling the earth with the news of her wonderful life. All those who were awakened by such a sweet melody went out of the city, and having diligently inquired what was happening, someone said: "The disciples are carrying that Mary who died, and they are singing the melody that you hear about her." Then they all ran to take up arms, inciting one another by saying: "Come, let us kill all the disciples, and let us consume with fire the body that once bore that seducer." And beholding this the prince of the priests, also astonished and filled with anger, exclaimed scornfully: "Here is the tabernacle of the one who troubled us and our generation, [see] now what glory she has received." And after he had said this, he laid his hand on the bier and tried to cast it to the ground together with the body, but when he placed his hands on the bier they withered instantly and remained attached to it: tortured by great suffering he cried out with loud laments, and the rest of the people were struck blind by the angels who were in the clouds. Then the prince of the priests cried out, "I beg you, oh St. Peter, do not abandon me in this tribulation, I beg you to intercede for me with the Lord; don't you remember how I forgave you the times you were accused by the maidservant." To this Peter said: "We are being disturbed in the obsequies to our Lady, and at the moment we cannot attend to curing you. But if you will believe in the Lord Jesus and in the one who bore him, I trust that you will promptly receive the gift of health." And the priest replied: "I believe the Lord Jesus to be the true son of God, and that this is his most holy mother." Instantly his hands were released from the bier, but the dryness remained in his arms and the severe pain had not left him. Then Peter said: "Kiss the bier and say I believe in God Jesus Christ, whom she carried in her womb, remaining a virgin after his birth." And when he did this he was restored. . . .

For the author of the *Legendario*, the chief priest's insult to the corpse of Mary was resolved in the description of a miraculous cure and, finally, in the exaltation of the Virgin Mary, Christ's mother. But evidently, for Menocchio, the account of the miracle was unimportant, and the reaffirmation of Mary's virginity, which he repeatedly rejected, even less so. He singles out only an action by the priest, the "dishonor" to Mary during her burial, evidence of her miserable condition. Through the filter of Menocchio's memory Voragine's story is transformed into its very opposite.

18

The mention of the passage from the *Legendario* was almost incidental. The one that we have already cited from the *Fioretto della Bibbia*, however, was much more important. In the first interrogation, we recall, Menocchio had insisted that he didn't believe in the immaculate conception of Mary by virtue of the Holy Spirit "because many men have been born into the world, but none of a virgin woman," and also because in a book called *Fioretto della Bibbia* he had read "that St. Joseph called our Lord Jesus Christ his son." He argued from this that Christ was the son of St. Joseph. Now in chapter 166 of the *Fioretto*, "How Jesus was sent to school," one reads that Jesus cursed the teacher who slapped him, and caused him to be stricken dead on the spot. Viewing the anger of the bystanders, "Joseph said, 'Control yourself my son, can you not see how many people hate us?' " "My son" Menocchio noted. But on the same page, in the chapter immediately preceding, which is entitled "How Jesus, while playing with other children, revived a child who had died," Menocchio could have read the following reply from Mary to a woman who had asked her if Jesus was her son: "Yes, he is my son, his father is the one God."

Menocchio's manner of reading was obviously one-sided and arbitrary—almost as if he was searching for confirmation of ideas and convictions that were already firmly entrenched. In the present instance, the conviction was that "Christ was born a man like us." It was irrational to believe that Christ was born of a virgin, and that he died on the cross: "If he was God eternal he should not have let himself be taken and crucified."

19

We shouldn't be surprised by Menocchio's use of passages in the *Legendario* and the *Fioretto*, taken from the apocryphal gospels. In view of the contrast he drew between the laconic simplicity of God's Word—"four words"— and the immoderate growth of Scripture, the very notion of apocryphal had to be abandoned. Apocryphal and canonical gospels alike were placed on the same level and were regarded as purely human texts. On the other hand, contrary to what we might have expected in view of the testimony given by the people of Montereale ("he is always arguing with one person or another, and he has the vernacular Bible and imagines that he bases his reasoning on it"), Menocchio made very few specific references to Scripture during his trial. In fact, such parascriptural adaptations as the *Fioretto della Bibbia* would seem to be better known to him than the vernacular Bible. Thus, on 8 March, replying to an unspecified question put to him by the vicar general, Menocchio proclaimed, "I say that it is a greater rule to love one's neighbor than to love God." Even this statement was based on a text. Menocchio added immediately afterward: "because I read in a *Historia del Giudicio* that when judgment day comes, [God] will say to that angel: 'You are wicked, you have never done a good deed for me'; and that angel replies: 'My lord, I have never seen you so that I could do you a good deed.' [And God said] 'I was hungry and you did not feed me, I was thirsty and you did not give me drink, I was naked and you did not clothe me, when I was in prison you did not come to visit me.' And because of this I believed that God was that poor neighbor, because he said 'I was that beggar.' "
And this is the corresponding passage from the *Historia del Giudicio:*

> Oh, you who have already been blessed by my father
> Come to possess my glory:
> Hungry and thirsty was I,
> And you gave me to eat and drink;
> In prison I suffered bitter torment,
> And always you came to see me;
> I was infirm, and was visited
> And I died, and I was buried by you.
>
> And after each one has been gladdened
> They will come to Jesus Christ to ask
> "When, Lord, were you hungry
> That we gave you to drink and eat?
> When, infirm, were you visited
> And, dead, did we come to bury you?
> When, in prison, did we visit you,
> And when did we give you clothing?"

Christ will reply in joyful countenance:
"That beggar who came to the door
Famished, afflicted, and overcome
Was asking for charity in my name,
He was not driven off or cut down by you,
But he ate and drank of what was yours,
To him you gave for love of God:
Know that I was that beggar."

From the left they will then seek to speak
But God will drive them off with great anger,
Saying: "Sinners of evil life
Go dwell amidst the eternal flames of hell.
From you I received nothing to drink or eat
Nor did you do anything good for love of me.
Go, damned ones, to the everlasting fire
Where you will abide in eternal grief."

Those sorrowful peoples will respond:
"When, Lord, did we ever see you
Famished, afflicted, and in distress,
When did you suffer such travails in prison?"
And then Christ glorious will reply:
"When you drove off the miserable beggar.
You did not have pity for the downtrodden
Or ever show charity toward them."

One can see that these crude octaves prosaically copy a passage from the Gospel of Matthew 25:41–46. But it's to these verses, rather than to the biblical text, that Menocchio is referring. Here, too, the borrowing from the printed page—which is basically accurate except for a curious slip that attributes the protestations of the damned to the "angel"—actually becomes a revision of it. But if distortion of the meaning in the preceding cases had occurred essentially by way of omissions, the procedure here is more complex. Menocchio takes one more step in respect to the text that, though small in appearance, is actually enormous: if God is our neighbor, "because he said, 'I was that beggar,' " it's more important to love our neighbor than to love God. It was a conclusion that heightened in a radical direction the insistence on a practical, active religiosity common to almost all Italian heretical groups at this time. Even the Anabaptist Bishop Benedetto d'Asolo taught the belief in "only one God, only one Jesus Christ our Lord the mediator" and charity toward one's neighbor, because "on the day of judgment . . . we shall be asked only if we gave food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited the sick, sheltered travelers . . . these are the foundations of charity." But Menocchio's attitude toward preaching of this type—if it actually reached his ears, as seems possible—was not simply a passive one. A decided tendency to reduce religion to morality appears frequently in his utterances. In a remarkable line of reasoning, packed as usual with vivid images, Menocchio explained to the inquisitor that to blaspheme is not sinful "because it only hurts oneself and not one's neighbor, just as if I have a cloak and tear it, I injure only myself and no one else, and I believe that he who does no harm to his neighbor does not commit sin; and because we are all children of God, if we do not hurt one another, as for example, if a father has several children, and one of them says 'damn my father,' the father may forgive him, but if this child breaks the head of someone else's child he cannot pardon him so easily if he does not pay: therefore have I said that it is not sinful to blaspheme because it does not hurt anyone." Thus, the person who doesn't injure his neighbor is not committing a sin: man's relationship to God becomes unimportant compared to his relationship with his neighbor. And if God is that neighbor, why then do we need God?

Certainly, Menocchio didn't take this final step that would have led him to affirm an ideal of a just human society wholly devoid of religious values. For him, love toward a neighbor remained a religious precept, or, better yet, the very essence of religion. And, generally, his attitude wasn't without vacillation (for this reason, in his case one should speak only of a tendency to reduce religion to morality). He was accustomed to say to his compatriots (according to the witness Bartolomeo d'Andrea): "I teach you not to do evil, not to take the property of others, and this is the good that we can do." But during the interrogation that took place on the afternoon of 1 May, the inquisitor asked him to specify what were "the works of God" by means of which one went to heaven, to which Menocchio—who, in fact, had spoken simply of "good works"—replied: "love [God], adore him, sanctify him, revere and thank him; and also one should be charitable, merciful, peaceful, loving, honorable, obedient to one's superiors, pardon injuries, and keep promises: and for doing this one goes to heaven, and this is all we need to go there." In this instance, duties toward one's neighbor were placed alongside duties to God, without stating the superiority of the first over the second. But the list of the "bad works" immediately following—"to rob, assassinate, commit usury, commit cruelties, dishonor, vituperate, and murder: these are seven works that displease God, do harm to the world, and are pleasing to the devil"—dealt exclusively with human relationships, with man's capacity to be unjust toward his fellow man. And Menocchio's simplified religion ("and for doing this one goes to heaven, and this is all we need to go there") couldn't be accepted by the inquisitor: "What are God's

commandments"? "I believe," Menocchio replied, "they are the ones I mentioned before." "To call out God's name, to sanctify holy days, are these not precepts of God"? "This I do not know."

In reality, it was just this exclusive insistence on the Gospel message in its most meager and simple form that permitted extreme conclusions such as Menocchio's. This danger had been foreseen with exceptional insight almost fifty years earlier in one of the most important writings produced by Italian evangelism—an anonymous booklet published in Venice with the title *Alcune ragioni del perdonare.* The author, Tullio Crispoldi, was a faithful companion of the celebrated bishop of Verona, Gian Matteo Giberti. Building upon a series of the bishop's sermons, Crispoldi endeavored to demonstrate with a variety of arguments that the essence of Christianity was "the law of forgiving," the forgiving of one's neighbor so as to be forgiven by God. At a certain point, however, he came to see clearly that this "law of forgiving" could be interpreted exclusively in a human sense, thus "endangering" the worship owed to God: "The prescription to forgive is so powerful and so prevalent that by making this law, God has endangered the devotion that is his due. In fact, it has the semblance of a law made only by men for the salvation of all men, by means of which it is openly declared that God does not want to consider the offenses that we have committed against him, however numerous, so long as we forgive and love one another. And indeed, if he did not grant grace to those who forgive and allow them to leave behind their sins and become good men, everyone would have cause to judge this not as being a law of God intended for governing men, but rather as a law devised by men who, for the sake of being and living in peace, do not concern themselves with offenses or sins committed secretly or in company so as not to disturb the peace and well-being of the world. But seeing that he who forgives for the honor of God, obtains what he desires from God and is favored by God and becomes disposed to do good works and to turn away from evil ones, people become strengthened in their awareness of the goodness of God toward us."

Only the supernatural intervention of divine grace, then, prevents taking the core of Christ's message (the "law of forgiving") as a purely human political bond. The possibility of such a worldly interpretation of religion is clearly very much on the mind of the author of the booklet. He is familiar with (and partly influenced by) its most coherent expression, Machiavelli's—and not the Machiavelli diminished by over-simplification into the theoretician of the *religio instrumentum regni,* but rather the Machiavelli of the *Discorsi,* who sees religion primarily as a powerful factor contributing to political unity. But the target being attacked in the passage that we have quoted seems to be different: not so much the tendency to consider religion objectively *from without,* but rather that which corrodes its foundations *from within.* Crispoldi's anxiety that the "law of forgiving" could be understood as "a law made only by men for the salvation of all men, by means of which it is openly declared that God does not want to consider the offenses that we have committed against him, however numerous, so long as we forgive and love one another," recalls almost to the letter Menocchio's words to the inquisitor: "I believe that he who does no harm to his neighbor does not commit sin; and because we are all children of God, if we do not hurt one another, as for example, if a father has several children, and one of them says 'damn my father,' the father may forgive him, but if this child breaks the head of someone else's child he cannot pardon him so easily if he does not pay . . . ."

Naturally, there's no reason to suppose that Menocchio was familiar with the *Ragioni del perdonare.* In sixteenth-century Italy, however, in the most heterogeneous circles a tendency existed (recognized with remarkable perception by Crispoldi) to reduce religion to nothing more than worldly reality—to a moral or political bond. This tendency found different modes of expression, based on very different premises. However, even in this instance, it may be possible to discern a partial convergence between the most progressive circles among the educated classes and popular groups with radical leanings.

At this point, if we should return to the rough verses of the *Historia del Giudicio* cited by Menocchio in order to justify his own belief ("I say that it is a greater rule to love one's neighbor than to love God") it seems clear that once again his interpretative filter was far more important than the "source" itself. Even if Menocchio's interpretation was triggered by contact with this text, its roots had distant origins.

20

And yet, there were some texts that really had meant a lot to Menocchio: and first among them, by his own admission, was "the knight Zuanne de Mandavilla," namely, the *Travels* of Sir John Mandeville. When the trial reopened in Portogruaro the inquisitors, threateningly this time, reiterated the usual exhortation to name "all his accomplices, or else more rigorous measures would be taken against him; because it seems impossible to this Holy Office that he should have learned so many things alone, and that he does not have companions." "Sir, I am not aware that I ever taught anyone," was Menocchio's reply, "nor has anyone shared my