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Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It

Carlo Ginzburg

Translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi

1. I believe that I heard of *microhistory* for the first time from Giovanni Levi in 1977 or 1978, and I adopted this previously unheard-of word without asking what it meant literally; I suppose I contented myself with the reference to a reduced scale suggested by the prefix *micro*. I well remember, too, that in those early conversations we spoke of *microhistory* as if it were a label attached to an empty container waiting to be filled.¹

Some time later Levi, Simona Cerutti, and I began working on a series entitled precisely *Microstorie* published by Casa Editrice Einaudi in Turin. Twenty-odd volumes by both Italian and foreign authors have appeared; a few of the Italian works have been translated into other languages. In some quarters there has been talk of an Italian school of microhistory. Recently, thanks to a small retrospective investigation into terminology, I discovered that this word, which we thought was free of connotation, had already been used by others.²

2. To the best of my knowledge, the first person to dredge up the word *microhistory* as a self-defined term was an American scholar, George R. Stewart, in 1959. Stewart, who lived from 1895 to 1980, and who for

I should like to thank Patrick Fridenson, with whom I discussed these pages to great advantage while writing them. Perry Anderson read and criticized them before they took a definitive form; my debt towards him is once more very great.

1. Levi remembers the first discussions about the series that he had with Giulio Einaudi and me to have been 1974, 1975, or 1976, but this is a lapse in memory. See "Il piccolo, il grande, il piccolo: Intervista a Giovanni Levi," *Meridiana* (Sept. 1990): 229.

2. Made possible by ORION, the program on which the UCLA library computerized catalogue is based.

many years was a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, must have been an exceptional person. The vast bibliography of this liberal polymath includes, in addition to various novels (which I have not read), a precocious ecological manifesto; a recapitulation of universal history in the form of an autobiography of the human species; and a chronicle, written in collaboration with others, of the resistance by Stewart and other professors, including Ernst Kantorowicz, to the loyalty oath imposed by the University of California during the McCarthy era.³ Stewart's best known books, *Names on the Land* and *American Place-Names*, are dedicated to the toponymy of the United States.⁴ In a lecture, taking as his point of departure the place names mentioned in a Horatian ode, he asserted that to interpret a literary text it is necessary first of all to decipher the background references—places, vegetation, meteorological conditions—that it contains.⁵ Stewart's passion for microscopic detail also inspired the book that interests me here: *Pickett's Charge: A Microhistory of the Final Charge at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863*. In it Stewart analyzes minutely for over three hundred pages the decisive battle in the American Civil War. The title refers to an event that lasted only about twenty minutes: the desperate, unsuccessful assault led by a Confederate battalion under Major General Edward Pickett. The account unfolds within a narrow time frame, a period of fifteen hours. The maps and diagrams that accompany the text are identified by captions such as "The Can-

3. See George R. Stewart, *Not So Rich as You Think* (Boston, 1968), *Man: An Autobiography* (New York, 1946), and *The Year of the Oath: The Fight for Academic Freedom at the University of California* (1952; Berkeley, 1971). In the latter, Kantorowicz, who is not named but is easily recognized, makes a fleeting appearance. Compare Ernst Kantorowicz, *The Fundamental Issue: Documents and Marginal Notes on the University of California Loyalty Oath* (San Francisco, 1950): "This is not intended to be the history of 'The Year of the Oath.' This subject has been admirably dealt with by Professor George R. Stewart" (p. 1).

4. See Stewart, *Names on the Land* (1945; New York, 1967) and *American Place-Names* (New York, 1970). See also Madison S. Beeler, "George R. Stewart, Toponymist," *Names* 24 (June 1976): 77–85; Joseph M. Backus, "Interview: George R. Stewart on Names of His Characters," *Names* 9 (Mar. 1961): 53–57; and John Caldwell, *George R. Stewart* (Boise, Idaho, 1981).

5. See Stewart, "The Regional Approach to Literature," *College English* 9 (Apr. 1948): 370–75.

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nonade (1.10–2.55 P.M.).” The outcome of the battle of Gettysburg is played out in a matter of seconds, between a clump of trees and a stone wall.⁶ Within this narrow compass in time and space, Stewart analyzes in almost obsessive detail what he defines as “the climax of the climax, the central moment of our history”—and as such, part of universal history. If George Edward Pickett’s failed charge had instead succeeded, Stewart suggests, the battle of Gettysburg might have ended differently, and “the existence of two rival republics would probably have prevented the United States from turning the balance of two World Wars and becoming a global power.”⁷ Stewart’s kind of microhistory could wind up as a reflection upon Cleopatra’s nose.

3. A few years later, independently of Stewart, a Mexican scholar, Luis González, inserted the word *microhistory* into the subtitle of a monograph. The book investigates, within the span of four centuries, the transformations experienced by a tiny, “forgotten” village. But the minute dimensions are redeemed by its representative characteristics. Besides the fact that González was born and lived there, this is the element that justifies the choice of San José de Gracia over a thousand other villages just like it. Here microhistory is synonymous with local history, written, as González stressed citing Paul Leuilliot, from a qualitative rather than a quantitative perspective.⁸ The success enjoyed by *Pueblo en vilo* (reprinted and translated into French) persuaded its author to theorize about its methodology.⁹ González distinguished microhistory from the anecdotal and discredited *petite histoire*; and he reiterated its identity with what in England, France, and the United States is called local history, and which Nietzsche had defined as “antiquarian or archeological history.” Finally, to counteract the objections aroused by the word *microhistory*, he suggested two alternatives: *matria* history, suitable for evoking that small, weak, feminine, sentimental world of the mother which revolves around the family and the village; or *yin* history, the Taoist term that recalls all that is “feminine, conservative, terrestrial, sweet, obscure and painful.”¹⁰

4. Even while claiming for himself the basic paternity over the word *microhistory*, González recalled that it had already appeared in Braudel’s

6. Stewart, *Pickett’s Charge: A Microhistory of the Final Attack at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863* (Boston, 1959), p. viii.

7. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

8. See Luis González, *Pueblo en vilo: Microhistoria de San José de Gracia* (Guanajuato, Mexico, 1968): “La pequeñez, pero la pequeñez típica” (p. 2). The reference to Leuilliot is on p. 16.

9. See González, “El arte de la microhistoria,” *Invitación a la microhistoria* (Mexico City, 1973), pp. 8–53 and “Teoría de la microhistoria,” *Nueva invitación a la microhistoria* (Mexico City, 1982), pp. 31–46. For a perceptible echo of González’s work in other Mexican publications of these years, see, for example, Luis Aboites, *La revolución mexicana en Espita, 1910–1940: Microhistoria de la formación del Estado de la revolución* (Tlalpan, 1982).

10. González, “El arte de la microhistoria,” pp. 12, 14.

contribution to the *Traité de sociologie* edited by Georges Gurvitch (1958–1960), but “sin significación concreta reconocida.”¹¹ Actually for Braudel *microhistoire* had a precise but negative connotation. It was synonymous with that “history of events” [*histoire événementielle*], with that “traditional history” that saw the “so-called history of the world” dominated by protagonists who resembled orchestra directors.¹² Braudel held that, within limits of brief and convulsive time, this traditional history was less interesting than microsociology on the one hand, and econometrics on the other.

Braudel had declared his hostility in regard to *histoire événementielle*, identified with political history, even from the time of his *Méditerranée* (1949). Ten years later he was once again harshly demonstrating the same displeasure. But he was too intelligent, too impatient to content himself with repeating what had now become for many an accepted truth due to his own authority. Suddenly putting aside what at this point seemed to him “old misunderstandings,” Braudel wrote: “The incident (if not the event, the socio-drama) exists in repetition, regularity, multitude, and there is no way of saying absolutely whether its level is quite without fertility or scientific value. It must be given closer examination.”¹³ Twenty-five years had to pass before this suggestion would be acted on.¹⁴

Braudel excluded the possibility of scholarly apprehension of singularity: the incident, the *fait divers* could, perhaps, find acceptance simply because it was considered repetitive—an adjective that in González became “typical.” But microhistory remained condemned.¹⁵ The word, obviously modelled on *microeconomics* and *microsociology*, remained clothed in a technicist aura, as emerges from this passage of *Les Fleurs bleues*, perhaps the best novel by Raymond Queneau. The two speakers are the Duke of Auge and his chaplain:

11. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

12. Fernand Braudel, “Histoire et sociologie,” *Traité de sociologie*, ed. Georges Gurvitch, 2 vols. (Paris, 1958–1960), 1:86, 92; trans. Sarah Matthews, under the title “History and Sociology,” *On History* (Chicago, 1980), pp. 67, 74; rept. in part in Braudel, “Histoire et sociologie,” *Écrits sur l'histoire* (Paris, 1969), pp. 97–122.

13. Braudel, “History and Sociology,” pp. 74–75. See Braudel, *Le Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949); trans. Siân Reynolds, under the title *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York, 1972).

14. See the section entitled “Fait divers, fait d'histoire,” containing contributions by Maria Pia Di Bella, Michel Béé, Raffaella Comaschi, Lucette Valensi, and Michelle Perrot, *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 38 (July-Aug. 1983): 821–919. In his introduction to these essays, Marc Ferro juxtaposes the analysis of *fait divers* to works in microhistory as similar and inverse but complementary operations (p. 825). In the same issue Perrot, in “Fait divers et histoire au XIX^e siècle” (see p. 917), referred to the passage by Braudel quoted above.

15. Still today the term cannot free itself from ironic connotations, as emerges, for example, from an allusion by Georges Charachidzé, *La Mémoire indo-européenne du Caucase* (Paris, 1987): “Ce que j'avais voulu appeler, par jeu, ‘microhistoire’” (p. 131).

What is it exactly that you want to know?
 What you think about universal history in general and of general history in particular. I'm listening.
 I'm really tired, said the chaplain.
 You can rest later. Tell me, for example, is this Council of Basel universal history?
 But of course: it is universal history in general.
 And what about my small cannon?
 General history in particular.
 And the marriage of my daughters?
 Scarcely 'the history of events.' At the most, microhistory.
 What kind of history? the Duke of Auge stormed. What the devil kind of language is this? What is today anyway? Pentecost?
 Please excuse me, sire. The effects of exhaustion, as you can see.¹⁶

The Duke of Auge, just like many readers of Queneau in 1965, had never heard of microhistory. For this reason, perhaps, ignoring the chaplain's precise classification, the publisher of the French translation of González's *Pueblo en vilo* did not hesitate to substitute in the subtitle and in the text the words *histoire universelle* for *microhistoire* with unintentional comic effects.¹⁷

5. *Microhistory, microhistoria, microhistoire*: from which of these independent traditions did the Italian *microstoria* derive? On the strictly terminological level that has occupied us thus far, the answer would seem to be clear: from the French *microhistoire*. I am thinking first of all of the splendid translation by Italo Calvino published in 1967 of *Les Fleurs bleues*

16.

—Que voulez-vous savoir au juste?
 —Ce que tu penses de l'histoire universelle en général et de l'histoire générale en particulier. J'écoute.
 —Je suis bien fatigué, dit le chapelain.
 —Tu te reposeras plus tard. Dis-moi, ce Concile de Bâle, est-ce de l'histoire universelle?
 —Oui-da. De l'histoire universelle en général.
 —Et mes petits canons?
 —De l'histoire générale en particulier.
 —Et le mariage de mes filles?
 —A peine de l'histoire événementielle. De la microhistoire, tout au plus.
 —De la quoi? hurle le duc d'Auge. Quel diable de langage est-ce là? Serait-ce aujourd'hui ta Pentecôte?
 —Veuillez m'excuser, messire. C'est, voyez-vous, la fatigue.

(Raymond Queneau, *Les Fleurs bleues* [Paris, 1965], pp. 84–85). If I am not mistaken, the Braudelian texts cited apropos this passage by Ruggiero Romano, "Un Modèle pour l'histoire," in Raymond Queneau, ed. Andrée Bergens (Paris, 1975), p. 288, are relevant for *histoire événementielle*, not for *microhistoire*.

17. See González, *Les Barrières de la solitude: Histoire universelle de San José de Gracia, village mexicain*, trans. Anny Meyer (Paris, 1977).

[*I fiori blu*]; second, of a passage in Primo Levi in which, to the best of my knowledge, the word *microstoria* appears in Italian for the first time in an autonomous manner.¹⁸ It occurs at the beginning of the chapter “Carbon,” with which *The Periodic Table* concludes:

The reader, at this point, will have realized for some time now that this is not a chemical treatise: my presumption does not reach so far—“*ma voix est foible, et même un peu profane.*” Nor is it an autobiography, save in the partial and symbolic limits in which every piece of writing is autobiographical, indeed every human work; but it is in some fashion a history. It is—or would have liked to be—a microhistory, the history of a trade and its defeats, victories, and miseries, such as everyone wants to tell when he feels close to concluding the arc of his career, and art ceases to be long.¹⁹

There is nothing in these calm and melancholy words to suggest that twelve years later their author would take his life. The reduction of scale suggested by the word *microhistory* fits in with the acknowledgement of the limits of existence, with the sense of one’s own capacities that dominates this passage. Primo Levi probably encountered it in Calvino’s Italian translation, which he must have checked against Queneau’s original text. Knowledge of the translation of *Les Fleurs bleues* seems certain, given the close relationship that united Levi to Calvino; moreover, the last page of “Carbon” in *The Periodic Table* echoes closely the last page of Calvino’s *Il barone rampante*.²⁰ A fresh encounter between Calvino and Primo Levi, by way of Queneau, occurred a few years later due to the Italian translation of the latter’s *Petite cosmogonie portative*.²¹

Shortly after its appearance in *The Periodic Table*, the word *microhistory* entered historical usage, losing, as often happens, its original negative connotation. Giovanni Levi (Primo Levi’s distant cousin) was undoubt-

18. *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, ed. Salvatore Battaglia, 10 vols. (Turin, 1961–1978), 10:365, refers to this passage apropos the entry for *microstoria* (defined as “voce dotta,” that is, “learned entry”). The definition that follows—“particularly brief and succinct history, summary and essential account”—is definitely unsatisfactory.

19. Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (1975; New York, 1984), p. 224.

20. See Italo Calvino, *Il barone rampante* (Milan, 1985). The similarity was not missed by Cesare Cases in his introduction to Levi, *Opere*, 3 vols. (Turin, 1987–1990), 1:xvii. For his concern in regard to Levi, apprentice writer, see Calvino, *I libri degli altri: Lettere, 1947–1981*, ed. Giovanni Tesio (Turin, 1991), pp. 382–83, as well as the letter (of a very different tone) on the revision of *Il sistema periodico*, p. 606. See also Severino Cesari, *Colloquio con Giulio Einaudi* (Rome, 1991), p. 173.

21. See Queneau, *Piccola cosmogonia portatile*, trans. Sergio Solmi (Turin, 1982), which includes Calvino, “Piccola guida alla *Piccola cosmogonia*,” p. 162. See also Levi, *Laltrui mestiere* (Turin, 1985), pp. 150–54 (trans. Rosenthal, under the title *Other People’s Trades* [New York, 1989]), and the declaration by Carlo Carena in Cesari, *Colloquio con Giulio Einaudi*, p. 172.

edly behind this transposition.²² *Microhistory* rapidly replaced *micro-analysis*, which had been used in these years by Edoardo Grendi, more or less with the same meaning.²³

6. It is a meaning still to be explained; the history of a word, obviously, determines its possible applications only in part. This is proved indirectly by the Zaharoff lecture that Richard Cobb devoted to Raymond Queneau in 1976: a species of historiographical manifesto that fits none of the trends discussed thus far. Cobb began with the ironic sympathy felt by Queneau for the timid, modest, provincial personages in his novels. He appropriated their words in order to counterbalance news of local happenings—the only kind that were of interest—with political events; and he concluded by assuming as his own slogan the colorful curse hurled by Zasia at Napoléon.²⁴ Basically, this is an exaltation of minor historiography (Cobb does not use the term *microhistory*) against the historiography that concentrates on the great and the powerful. The naiveté of this interpretation is obvious. Queneau does not identify in any way with his personages. The tenderness he felt for the provincial life of Le Havre coexisted in him with an omnivorous, encyclopedic passion for the most unforeseeable knowledge. His mocking curiosity for the *fait divers* did not stop him from proposing a drastic remedy for the prescientific character of historiography, and he elaborated a rigorous mathematical model to confine the disordered course of human acts.²⁵ But neither the author of *Une Histoire modèle* nor the auditor and later editor of Alexandre Kojève's courses on Hegel's *Phenomenology* appear in the portrait simplified to the point of distortion drawn by Cobb. Totally missing is the tension that runs through all of Queneau's work between the warmth of the narrator's intimate glance and the coldness of the scientist's detached observation.²⁶

This is perhaps not so strange. Cobb is an empiricist who claims to be superior to theoretical questions; and, after all, for him the use of Queneau is a mere pretext.²⁷ But the proposal of a minor historiography

22. At any rate it was an unconscious echo: to the question "from what does the term 'microstoria' derive?" Giovanni Levi stated (private conversation, 29 Dec. 1991) that he knew only that the term had been used by Queneau. The last part of Queneau's passage quoted above was used as the epigraph for Raul Merzario, *Il paese stretto: Strategie matrimoniali nella diocesi di Como secoli XVI–XVIII* (Turin, 1981), one of the first books published in the Einaudi series entitled *Microstorie*.

23. See Edoardo Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale," *Quaderni storici* 35 (Aug. 1977): 506–20.

24. Richard Cobb, *Raymond Queneau* (Oxford, 1976).

25. See Queneau, *Une Histoire modèle* (1942; Paris, 1966) and "Lectures pour un front," *Front national*, 5 Jan. 1945; rept. in *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres* (1950; Paris, 1965), pp. 170–72.

26. See, instead, the fine introduction by Italo Calvino to Queneau, *Segni, cifre e lettere e altri saggi* (Turin, 1981), esp. pp. xix–xx (a different and larger collection than the French edition of the same title).

27. See Cobb, *A Sense of Place* (London, 1975), about which see Grendi, "Lo storico e la didattica incosciente (Replica a una discussione)," *Quaderni storici* 46 (Apr. 1981): 338–46.

made in the name of Queneau has a symptomatic importance that Cobb, confirmed cultivator of his own eccentricity, would be the first to reject. The contrast between Historiography with a capital *H* and Zasio's "Napoléon mon cul" might suggest, apart from the obvious difference in tone, the contrast between *storia patria* and *storia patria* as outlined by González. To be sure, the latter's *microhistoria* focuses on typical phenomena, while Cobb's *petite histoire* focuses on the unpredictable and unrepeatable *fait divers*. But in both cases the choice of a circumscribed and close-up perspective reveals a dissatisfaction (explicit and aggressive in the case of Cobb, tactful and almost imperceptible in the case of González)²⁸ with the macroscopic and quantitative model that dominated the international historiographical scene between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s, primarily through the activity of Fernand Braudel and the historians of the *Annales* school.

7. None of the relatively heterogeneous group of Italian scholars of microhistory would recognize his thought in George Stewart's close-up "history of events," in the local history of González, or in the *petite histoire* of Richard Cobb. However, it cannot be denied that even Italian microhistory, though very different (beginning with its theoretical goals), originated in opposition to the historiographical model just mentioned. It was presented in the mid-1970s, with Braudel's backing, as the culmination of the functional-structural approach, the supreme historiographical paradigm, the third to have occurred in the story of more than two millennia that began with Herodotus.²⁹ But a few years earlier, the intrinsically ceremonial occasion of the publication of the *Mélanges* honoring Braudel (1973) revealed the existence of hidden tensions and anxieties at the very moment of the triumph. A parallel reading of two essays published on that occasion, one by Pierre Chaunu and the other by François Furet and Jacques Le Goff, seems instructive twenty years later. In both cases a historiographical program was being introduced and justified by some general historical reflections.³⁰ Chaunu spoke of the end of the anticolo-

28. Impatience with the pretenses of scientific historiography is more evident in a study by González that in its very title closely echoes Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation*. See González, "De la múltiple utilización de la historia," in *Historia ¿para que?* ed. Carlos Pereyra (1980; Mexico, 1990), pp. 55–74.

29. See Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The "Annales" Paradigm* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1976), where the two preceding paradigms are called respectively "exemplar" and "developmental" (p. 25). On microhistory as a response to the crisis of the "great Marxist and functionalist systems," see Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park, Pa., 1991), pp. 93–113, esp. pp. 93–94. See also Levi, *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago, 1988).

30. See Pierre Chaunu, "Un Nouveau Champ pour l'histoire sérielle: Le Quantitatif au troisième niveau," and François Furet and Jacques Le Goff, "Histoire et ethnologie," in *Méthodologie de l'histoire et des sciences humaines*, vol. 2 of *Mélanges en l'honneur de Fernand Braudel* (Toulouse, 1973), pp. 105–25, 227–43; the latter hereafter abbreviated "H." The text by Furet and Le Goff is divided in two parts that develop two communications "préparées en

nial wars (referring only to France) and to student revolts (in America and in Europe); of a disoriented Roman church following Vatican II; of an economic crisis in the most advanced countries that brought into question the very idea of progress; of challenge to the ideals of the Enlightenment that he interpreted consistently as a secularized transposition of an eschatological ideal. Furet, with words that we can suppose were shared by Le Goff, observed that the worldwide phenomenon of decolonization had placed the great nineteenth-century historiography, in its Manchesterian and Marxist versions, face to face with nonhistory; progress and change had run into inertia, stagnation. Common to both essays was a clear-cut rejection of theories of modernization (such as W. W. Rostow's, then in vogue, mentioned by Furet and Le Goff) that in Chaunu was coupled to a repudiation of modernity *tout court*. The research projects derived from these essays varied greatly. Chaunu proposed analyzing the traditional societies of the *ancien régime*, observing that the "great continuity of Latin Christendom which has unconsciously . . . been transformed into a Europe of the West" was "infinitely more tempting than the Nambikwaras or the Dogons," a statement that lumped together in disdainful rejection peoples from various continents being studied by ethnologists (Claude Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Griaule) from very different intellectual worlds.³¹ Instead, Furet and Le Goff suggested reconnecting the long-sundered bonds between history and ethnology by adopting a generally comparative perspective based on the explicit rejection (by Le Goff) of a Eurocentric approach. But at this point the two positions begin to converge; both Chaunu and Furet were aiming at a "serial history" based on the analysis of phenomena "selected and constructed as a function of their repetitive character" ("H," p. 231). Le Goff subscribed to the rejection of the single event on the part of the ethnologists and their concentration on "events repeated or awaited"; Le Roy Ladurie's analysis of the carnival in Romans, though praised, was evidently considered an exception. Chaunu insisted that after studying economies and societies, the time had come, using similar methods, to deal with the third level, that of civilizations; and he spoke with strong approval of Michel Vovelle's examination of Provençal testaments. Le Goff stressed that the attention to everyday man suggested by ethnology "naturally leads to the study of mentalities,

collaboration," entitled respectively "L'Histoire et l'homme sauvage," and "L'Historien et l'homme quotidien." In the first piece Furet outlines a general picture; in the second Le Goff proposes a program of research, with examples drawn from the sphere of medieval studies. Even if I distinguish between the two texts in my exposition, I am assuming basic agreement between their authors, as they have stated, except in cases where the opposite is indicated. On both Chaunu and Le Goff, one can read their self-portraits "Le Fils de la morte" and "L'Appétit de l'histoire," in *Essais d'ego-histoire*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris, 1987).

31. Chaunu, "Un Nouveau Champ pour l'histoire sérielle," p. 109. In French, the term *ethnologue* is more widely used than its synonym *anthropologue*.

considered as 'that which changes the least' in historical evolution" ("H," p. 237). Both essays ended up supporting the validity of the Braudelian paradigm, even while extending the range of its applicability.

8. It is not a simple matter to evaluate the import of this "even while." In all institutions, innovations, in fact ruptures with the past, make headway by means of the reaffirmation of a certain continuity with what has gone before. In the years that followed, precisely while Braudel's work was being translated into many languages (including English) and was reaching a public far beyond the world of specialists, the paradigm that out of convenience I have called Braudelian was rapidly declining. After Ladurie had proclaimed that the school of French historiography founded by Bloch and Febvre must accept the American challenge and adopt the capacities of the computer, he published the enormously successful *Montaillou*: a piece of research conducted in craftsmanlike fashion on a medieval village, population two hundred.³² Even Furet was dedicating himself to those themes of political history and the history of ideas that he had previously judged intrinsically resistant to serial history (see "H," p. 232). Questions that had been considered peripheral were popping up at the center of the discipline, and vice versa. The pages of the *Annales* (and the journals of half the world) were invaded by themes proposed by Le Goff in 1973: the family, the human body, relations between the sexes, cohorts, factions, charisma. Studies on the history of price fluctuations registered a brusque decline.³³

In France one has spoken of *nouvelle histoire* to describe this change in the intellectual climate that coincides significantly with the end of the long period of economic development that had begun in 1945.³⁴ The term is debatable, but the basic characteristics of the phenomenon are clear. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s the history of mentalities to which Braudel attributed a marginal significance acquired increasingly greater importance, often under the name of "historical anthropology."³⁵

32. See Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "L'Historien et l'ordinateur" (1968), *Le Territoire de l'historien* (Paris, 1973), p. 14, trans. Ben Reynolds and Siân Reynolds, under the title "The Historian and the Computer," *The Territory of the Historian* (Chicago, 1979); and Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: the Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, 1978).

33. On this historiographical mutation, see, in a perspective partially different from the one expressed here, Jacques Revel, "L'Histoire au ras du sol," in Levi, *Le Pouvoir au village: Histoire d'un exorciste dans le Piémont du septième siècle*, trans. Monique Aymard (Paris, 1989), pp. i–xxxiii, now more fully developed in Revel, "Micro-analyse et reconstitution du social," in *Ministère de la recherche et de la technologie: Colloque "anthropologie contemporaine et anthropologie historique,"* no. 2, pp. 24–37; text prepared for the Marseilles colloquium of the same title, 24–26 September 1992.

34. For a recapitulation, see *La Nouvelle Histoire*, ed. Le Goff, Roger Chartier, and Revel (Paris, 1978). We now have the introductory essay by Burke, "Overture: The New History, Its Past and Its Future," *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, pp. 1–23.

35. See Georges Duby, *Le Dimanche de Bouvines, 27 juillet 1214* (1973; Paris, 1985): "L'histoire . . . qu'on devait dire, plus tard et abusivement, 'nouvelle' (je dis abusivement, car la plupart des interrogations que nous fûmes si fiers de forger, nos prédécesseurs, avant que

The ideological “ambiguity” emphasized by Le Goff in 1973 undoubtedly contributed to this success.³⁶ Philippe Ariès has devoted some telling words to the subject. The criticism of progress “has passed from a reactionary right that had, moreover, abandoned it, to a left or, rather, a leftism with poorly drawn borders, rough, but vigorous. I do indeed believe (it’s a hypothesis) that there is a connection between the new reticence of the 1960s in regard to development, progress, modernity, and the passion brought by young historians to the study of preindustrial societies and their mentality.”³⁷

These words were implicitly autobiographical; as a young man Ariès had been a follower of Maurras and active in the ranks of *Action française*. Beginning in the 1970s this *historien du dimanche*, as Ariès dubbed himself, gradually became integrated into the group of *Annales* historians; he even was elected to the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*.³⁸ This academic anecdote can be viewed as one of the many symptoms of a much vaster transformation that was neither only French nor only academic. The frequently unconscious resumption of the themes of romantic opposition to capitalism on the part of leftist ecological movements is a component of it.³⁹

The “new reticence” to which Ariès alluded could become translated into divergent postures. It may be remembered that Furet had proposed fighting the ethnocentric abstraction of theories of modernization with a dose of ethnology.⁴⁰ Chaunu had suggested throwing overboard the ideals of modernity tied to the Enlightenment together with theories of modernization. The latter alternative—more radical from the ideological point of view—refused to bring the historian’s research tools into the discussion. The former was moving in this direction but stopped half way. Retrospectively, speaking primarily from my personal experience, I think that Italian research into microhistory began from a diagnosis that agreed in part with Furet’s but that arrived at a totally different prognosis.

ne s'appesantisse la chape du positivisme, les avaient formulées dans le second tiers du XIX^e siècle)” (pp. 7–8). See, in this regard, the extremely instructive book by Charles Rearick, *Beyond Enlightenment: Historians and Folklore in Nineteenth-Century France* (Bloomington, Ind., 1974).

36. See Le Goff, “Les Mentalités: Une Histoire ambiguë,” in *Faire de l'histoire*, ed. Le Goff and Nora, 3 vols. (Paris, 1974), 3:76–94.

37. Philippe Ariès, “L'Histoire des mentalités,” in *La Nouvelle Histoire*, p. 411.

38. See Ariès and Michel Winock, *Un Historien du dimanche* (Paris, 1980).

39. See *Alltagsgeschichte: Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen*, ed. Alf Lüdtke (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), and Geoff Eley, “Labor History, Social History, *Alltagsgeschichte*: Experience, Culture, and the Politics of the Everyday—A New Direction for German Social History?” *Journal of Modern History* 61 (June 1989): 297–343.

40. “Il n’y a rien d’étonnant à ce que, en même temps qu’elle [la grande histoire du XIX^e siècle] cherche désespérément à sauver son impérialisme comme porteuse de la ‘modernisation,’ elle retourne à l’ethnologie comme consciente de ses échecs” (“H,” p. 230).

9. The element of agreement lies in the rejection of ethnocentrism and of the teleology that for Furet characterized the historiography transmitted by the nineteenth century. The affirmation of a national entity, the advent of the bourgeoisie, the civilizing mission of the white race, and economic development furnished to historians a unifying principle of both a conceptual and narrative order, depending on the point of view and the scale of observation adopted. Ethnographic history conceived of along serial lines proposed breaking with this tradition. Here the paths traveled by serial history and by microhistory diverge: a divergence that is at once intellectual and political.

To select as a cognitive object only what is repetitive, and therefore capable of being serialized, signifies paying a very high price in cognitive terms. First of all, on the chronological plane, ancient history, as Furet himself observed, precludes such treatment (see "H," p. 233); and medieval history renders it very difficult (for many of the themes suggested by Le Goff the documentation is fragmentary). Second, on the thematic level, areas such as the history of ideas and political history (again as Furet would have it) by definition elude this type of investigation. But the most serious limitation of serial history emerges precisely through what should be its basic objective: "the equalization of individuals in their roles of economic or socio-cultural agents." This idea of equalization is doubly deceiving. On the one hand, it distorts an obvious element: in any society the conditions of access to the production of documentation are tied to a situation of power and thus create an inherent imbalance. On the other hand, it cancels out many particulars in the existing documentation for the benefit of what is homogeneous and comparable. With a trace of scientific pride, Furet affirmed: "the document, 'facts,' no longer exist for themselves, but in relationship to the series that precedes them and follows them; it is their relative value that becomes objective, and not their relationship to an ungraspable 'real' substance" ("H," p. 231). After the twofold filtering down of the data that has just been mentioned, it is not surprising if the relationship of the data in the series to reality becomes "ungraspable."

Historical knowledge, obviously, involves the construction of documentary series. Less obvious is the attitude that the historian must assume in regard to the anomalies that crop up in the documentation.⁴¹ Furet proposed ignoring them, observing that the *hapax legomenon* (that which is documentarily unique) is not usable in the perspective of serial history. But the *hapax legomenon*, strictly speaking, does not exist. Any document, even the most anomalous, can be inserted into a series. In addition, it can, if properly analyzed, shed light on still-broader documentary series.

10. In the early 1960s I began to study Inquisitorial trials in an attempt to reconstruct, in addition to the attitudes of the judges, those of the

41. I discussed this theme in my "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1989), pp. 96-125.

men and women accused of witchcraft. I quickly realized that this nonethnocentric approach would require comparison with the work of anthropologists, first among whom was Claude Lévi-Strauss. But the historiographical, conceptual, and narrative implications of such a choice became clarified for me only gradually, in the course of the years that separated *The Night Battles* (1966) from *Ecstasies* (1989).⁴² Along the way I wrote a book in which I attempted to reconstruct the ideas and attitudes of a sixteenth-century Friulian miller who was tried and condemned to death by the Inquisition (*The Cheese and the Worms* [1976]). The rejection of ethnocentrism had brought me not to serial history but to its opposite: the minute analysis of a circumscribed documentation, tied to a person who was otherwise unknown. In the introduction I took issue with an essay by Furet in the *Annales* in which he asserted that the history of the subaltern classes in preindustrial societies can only be studied from a statistical point of view.⁴³

Recently, Vovelle rejected as fictitious the alternative between individual biography and serial research.⁴⁴ In principle, I agreed. But in practice the alternative does exist. It consists of evaluating costs and benefits on a practical and, even more, on an intellectual plane. Roger Chartier wrote about *The Cheese and the Worms* that “it is on this reduced scale, and probably only on this scale, that we can understand, without deterministic reduction, the relationships between systems of belief, of values and representations on one side, and social affiliations on another.”⁴⁵ Even someone not disposed to accept such an uncompromising conclusion has to admit that the experiment was not only legitimate but useful, if only for analyzing the results.

In reducing the scale of observation, that which for another scholar could have been a simple footnote in a hypothetical monograph on the Protestant Reformation in Friuli was transformed into a book. The motives that impelled me at that time to make this choice are not totally clear to me. I am diffident about those that come to mind today because I would not like to project into the past intentions that have been maturing in the course of these many years. Gradually I came to realize that many events and connections of which I was totally unaware contributed to influencing the deci-

42. See Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (1966; Baltimore, 1983) and *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. Rosenthal (1989; New York, 1991).

43. See Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1980), p. xx. In the introduction to *The Night Battles* I had already stressed, against the undifferentiated notion of “collective mentality,” the importance of the development of specific beliefs on the part of single individuals.

44. See Michel Vovelle, “Histoire sérielle ou ‘case studies’: Vrai ou faux dilemme en histoire des mentalités,” in *Histoire sociale, sensibilités collectives, et mentalités: Mélanges Robert Mandrou* (Paris, 1985), pp. 39–49.

45. Chartier, “Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories,” in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), p. 32; emphasis added.

sions that I thought I had made independently: a banal fact in itself but always surprising, because it contradicts our narcissistic fantasies. How much does my book owe (to take an obvious example) to the political climate in Italy during the early 1970s? Something, perhaps a lot; but I suspect that the motives for my choices should be searched for elsewhere.

To discover them, at least in part, I shall begin by stating what may not be totally obvious. *The Cheese and the Worms* does not restrict itself to the reconstruction of an individual event; it narrates it. Furet had rejected narrative and, more specifically, literary narrative, as an expression, typically teleological, of the "history of events," whose time "is made up of a series of discontinuities described in the mode of the continuous: the classic subject matter of the narrative [*récit*]" ("H," p. 231). Against this type of "literary" narration Furet contrasted the examination of serial ethnographic history, problem by problem. He thus appropriated that widely accepted commonplace that still today tacitly identifies a specific form of narration, modeled on late nineteenth-century realist novels, with historical narrative *tout court*.⁴⁶ Granted, the figure of the omniscient historian-narrator, who unravels the slightest details of an event or the hidden motivations that inspire the behavior of individuals, social groups, or states, has gradually established itself. But it is only one of the many possibilities, as the readers of Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Musil know, or should know well.⁴⁷

Before beginning *The Cheese and the Worms* I had mulled over at length the relationship between research hypotheses and narrative strategies (the recent reading of Queneau's *Exercices de style* had powerfully whetted my disposition for experimentation).⁴⁸ I had set out to reconstruct the intellectual, moral, and fantastic world of the miller Menocchio on the basis of sources generated by persons who sent him to the stake. This in some way paradoxical project *could* translate itself into an account that filled the gaps in the documentation to form a polished surface.⁴⁹ It could, but obviously it should not, for reasons that were of a cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic order. The obstacles interfering with the research were constituent elements of the documentation and thus had to become part of the account; the same for the hesitations and silences of the protagonist in the face of his persecu-

46. This unstated identification is implied even in the famous essay by Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present*, no. 85 (Nov. 1979): 3-24; this did not advance the subsequent discussion.

47. Here I elaborate some observations formulated in my "L'Autre moyen âge de Jacques Le Goff," trans. Revel, review of *Pour un autre moyen âge*, by Le Goff, *Critique*, no. 395 (Apr. 1980): 345-54.

48. Richard Cobb contemporaneously became aware of the methodological implications of the *Exercices de style*: "apart from its brilliance both as parody and as conversation totally recaptured, [it] might also be described as an essay on the relative value and interpretation of conflicting or overlapping historical evidence" (Cobb, *Raymond Queneau*, p. 7).

49. I am speaking of lacunae in a relative, not absolute, sense (historical evidence is always lacunous, by definition). But new research questions create new lacunae.

tors' questions—or mine.⁵⁰ Thus, the hypotheses, the doubts, the uncertainties became part of the narration; the search for truth became part of the exposition of the (necessarily incomplete) truth attained. Could the result still be defined as “narrative history”? For a reader with the slightest familiarity with twentieth-century fiction, the reply was obviously yes.

11. But the impetus towards this type of narration (and more generally for occupying myself with history) came to me from further off: from *War and Peace*, from Tolstoy's conviction that a historical phenomenon can become comprehensible only by reconstructing the activities of *all* the persons who participated in it.⁵¹ This proposition, and the sentiments that had spawned it (populism, fierce disdain for the vacuous and conventional history of historians), left an indelible impression on me from the moment I first read it. *The Cheese and the Worms*, the story of a miller whose death is decreed from afar, by a man (a pope) who one minute earlier had never heard his name, can be considered a small, distorted product of Tolstoy's grand and intrinsically unrealizable project: the reconstruction of the numerous relationships that linked Napoléon's head cold before the battle of Borodino, the disposition of the troops, and the lives of all the participants in the battle, including the most humble soldier.

In Tolstoy's novel the private world (peace) and the public world (war) first run along parallel lines, now they intersect; Prince André participates in the battle of Austerlitz, Pierre at Borodino. Thus Tolstoy proceeded along that path that had been splendidly opened up to him by Stendahl with his description of the battle of Waterloo seen through the eyes of Fabrizio del Dongo.⁵² The romanticized personages were bringing to light the painful inadequacy with which historians had dealt with the historical event par excellence. It was a true and proper intellectual challenge, seeming to pertain to a past on which the sun has now set, including *l'histoire-bataille* and the polemic against *l'histoire-bataille*.⁵³ But reflection on the battle as a historiographical theme can still be useful. From it emerges indirectly a fundamental problem in the historian's trade.

12. To represent the *Battle between Alexander and Darius*, Albrecht Alt-

50. On the silences of Menocchio, see Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, pp. 110–12. These concluding words allude to my “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist,” *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, pp. 156–64. The connection between “échelle d'analyse” and “écriture de l'histoire,” identified as “questions majeures,” is grasped with great perspicacity in the anonymous editorial “Histoire et sciences sociales: Un Tournant critique?” *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 43 (Mar.–Apr. 1988): 292.

51. See Isaiah Berlin, “The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History,” in *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (London, 1978), pp. 22–81.

52. Tolstoy was well aware of his indebtedness. See Paul Boyer, *Chez Tolstoï: Entretiens à Iasnaïa Poliana* (Paris, 1950), p. 40; quoted in Berlin, “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” p. 56. Compare Nicola Chiaromonte, *Credere o non credere* (Milan, 1971). I am grateful to Claudio Fogu for this reference.

53. See Duby, *Le Dimanche de Bouvines*.

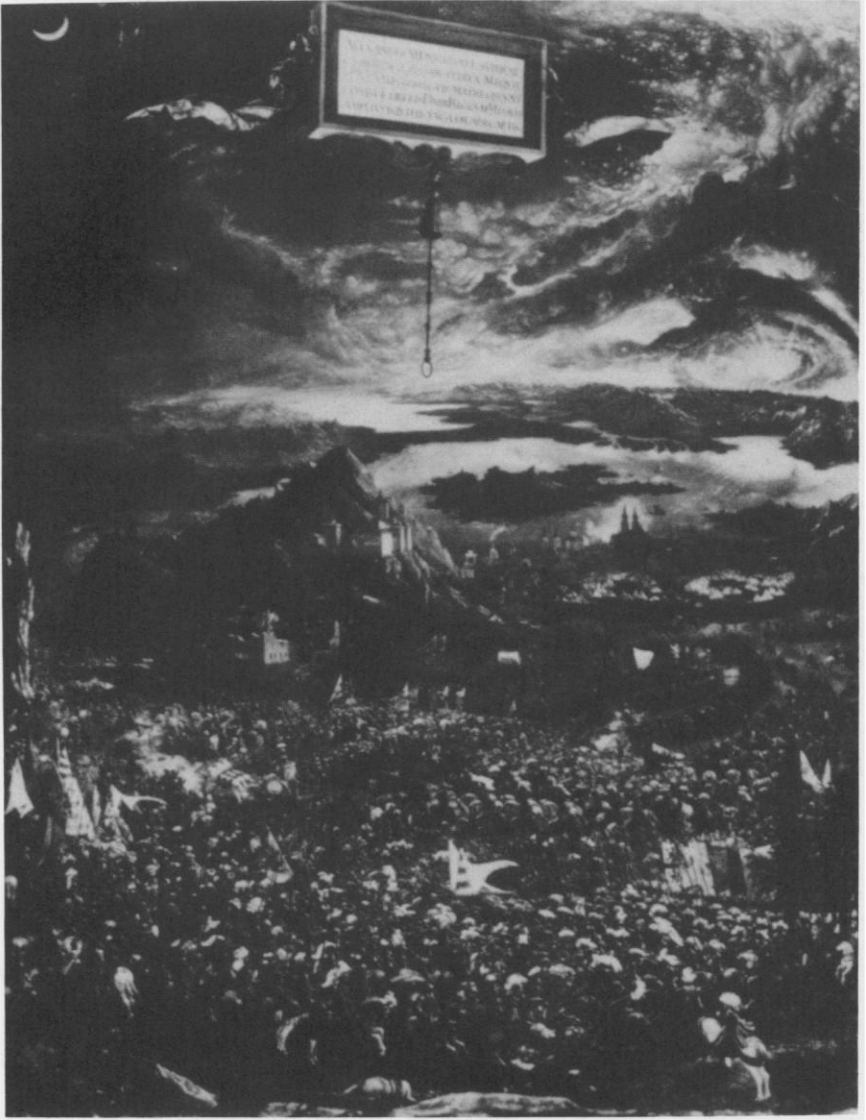


FIG. 1.—Albrecht Altdorfer, *Battle between Alexander and Darius*, 1529 (Alte Pinakothek, Munich).

dorfer selected a towering and distant vantage point, like an eagle's in flight. As if with the bird's keen sight he painted the light resplendent on armor, trappings, and harnesses, the banners' brilliant colors and white plumes swaying on warriors' helmets, the hordes of knights with their raised lances, resembling an immense porcupine, and then, gradually receding towards the background, the mountains behind the battlefield, the encampments, the waters and mists, the horizon arching to suggest the shape of the terrestrial sphere, the immense sky in which burn the setting sun and the waxing moon. No human eye will ever succeed in catching contemporaneously, as did Altdorfer, the historical specificity (real or presumed) of a battle and its cosmic irrelevance.⁵⁴

A battle, strictly speaking, is invisible, as we have been reminded (and not only thanks to military censorship) by the images televised during the Gulf War. Only an abstract diagram or a visionary imagination such as Altdorfer's can convey a global image of it. It seems proper to extend this conclusion to any event and with greater reason to whatever historical process. A close-up look permits us to grasp what eludes a comprehensive viewing, and vice versa.

This contradiction is at the heart of a chapter ("The Structure of the Historical Universe") in Siegfried Kracauer's final book published posthumously with a foreword by Paul Oskar Kristeller: *History: The Last Things before the Last*. While avowing himself to be more optimistic on this point than his friend Kracauer, Kristeller had to admit that "the discrepancy between general and special history, or as he calls it, macro and micro history, represents a serious dilemma."⁵⁵ Queneau's *Les Fleurs bleues* dates from 1967, Kracauer's death from a year before. We probably find ourselves in this instance facing an independent invention. But what is important is not the term *microhistory*; it is the significance that it gradually comes to assume in Kracauer's mind.

At first for Kracauer *microhistory* seems to be synonymous with *monographic research*. But the comparison between *microhistory* and cinematographic close-up (an obvious thing for the author of *From Caligari to Hitler* and *Theory of Film*) introduces new elements. Kracauer observes that some research of a specific character, such as Hubert Jedin's on the Councils of

54. See Otto Benesch, *Der Maler Albrecht Altdorfer* (Vienna, 1939): "Makrokosmos und Mikrokosmos werden eins" (p. 31). I realize that I already broached this theme in speaking of a Bruegel landscape (*Dark Day*) and of the battle with which Rossellini's film *Paisà* concludes. See, respectively, Ginzburg, *Spurensicherungen: Über verborgene Geschichte, Kunst und soziales Gedächtnis*, trans. Karl Friedrich Hauber (Berlin, 1983), p. 14 and "Di tutti i doni che porto a Kaisarè . . . Leggere il film scrivere la storia," *Storie e storia* 5 (1983): 5–17. On the conclusion of *Paisà*, see also the anecdote reported by Federico Fellini, who had worked on the film as Rossellini's assistant director, in Federico Fellini, *Comments on Film*, trans. Joseph Henry, ed. Giovanni Grazzini (1983; Fresno, Calif., 1988), p. 66.

55. Paul Oskar Kristeller, foreword, in Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (New York, 1969), p. viii; emphasis added. See esp. chap. 5, "The Structure of the Historical Universe," pp. 104–38, which Kracauer left unfinished.

Constance and Basel, are capable of modifying the comprehensive visions delineated by macrohistory. Are we compelled to conclude, then, with Aby Warburg that "God is in the detail"? It is the thesis sustained by "two great historians" such as the Tolstoy of *War and Peace* and Sir Lewis Namier (the pairing suggested by Kracauer is significant). But despite Kracauer's sympathy for these positions, he recognizes that certain phenomena can only be grasped by means of a macroscopic perspective. This suggests that the reconciliation between macro- and microhistory is not at all taken for granted (as Toynbee wrongly believed). It needs to be pursued. According to Kracauer, Marc Bloch offered the best solution in his *Feudal Society*: a constant back and forth between micro- and macrohistory, between close-ups and extreme long-shots, so as to continually thrust back into discussion the comprehensive vision of the historical process through apparent exceptions and cases of brief duration. This methodological prescription led to an affirmation of a decisively ontological nature: reality is fundamentally discontinuous and heterogeneous. Consequently, no conclusion attained apropos a determinate sphere can be transferred automatically to a more general sphere (what Kracauer calls the "law of levels").⁵⁶

These posthumous pages of Kracauer's, a nonprofessional historian, still constitute today, in my opinion, the best introduction to microhistory. As far as I know they have had no influence in the emergence of this historiographical current.⁵⁷ Certainly not on me, since I learned about them with deplorable delay only a few years ago. But when I read them they seemed strangely familiar, for two reasons. First, an indirect echo of them had reached me long before by way of my decisive encounter with *Minima Moralia*, the masterpiece in which Adorno, despite his adherence to the idea of totality, one he never renounced, implicitly demonstrated his own indebtedness to the micrological tradition inaugurated by Simmel and carried on by his friend (and in a sense master) Kracauer.⁵⁸ Second, the latter's ideas on history, beginning with the crucial one of the

56. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

57. In fact, they have not had much of an echo generally; but see the penetrating analysis by Martin Jay, who demonstrates most efficaciously that "in many ways, *History* is one of Kracauer's most compelling and original works, which deserves to be 'redeemed,' if one may borrow his own word, from an unmerited oblivion" (Martin Jay, "The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer," *Salmagundi*, nos. 31–32 [Fall 1975–Winter 1976]: 87).

58. See Jay, "The Extraterritorial Life," p. 62, on *Minima Moralia*; p. 63, on Kracauer's diffidence towards the category of "totality"; and p. 50, on the connection, in Kracauer's thought, between "wholeness and death." See also Jay, "Adorno and Kracauer: Notes on a Troubled Friendship," *Salmagundi*, no. 40 (Winter 1978): 42–66 and *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 245–46. The young Adorno read Kant under Kracauer's guidance; see R. Bodei, introduction, in Theodor W. Adorno, *Il gergo dell'autenticità [Jargon der Eigenlichkeit: Zur deutschen Ideologie]* (Turin, 1989), p. vii. I have acknowledged my debt to *Minima Moralia* in the introduction to *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, p. ix.

discontinuity of reality, are an explicit and conscious development of key phenomena in the culture of this century, from Proust to the cinema. The fact that certain ideas are in the air suggests that, starting from the same premises, it is possible to arrive at similar conclusions independently.

13. It is often difficult to demonstrate the existence of intellectual convergence and, contemporaneously, the lack of direct contacts. Hence, if I am not mistaken, the interest (going well beyond the relevance of the object) in the intellectual genealogy that I have attempted to reconstruct thus far: in part true, in part fictional, in part consciously and in part unconsciously. Looking at things from a distance I realize that our researches were a fragment of a more general tendency, the parameters of which almost totally escaped me at the time. It may not be pure chance that the word *microhistory* was used first in the title of a work that describes a battle with almost maniacal detail (although the conclusion of Stewart's book on Gettysburg seems to evoke Conrad rather than Tolstoy). Even less casual is the fact that some years later, undoubtedly independently, Kracauer identified microhistory with Tolstoy; I read this, I must confess, with pleasure mingled with slight disappointment (my approach had not been so anomalous, after all).

I am aware of a difficulty. Tolstoy's extraordinary capacity to communicate to the reader the physical, palpable certainty of reality seems incompatible with the wholly twentieth-century idea that I have placed at the core of microhistory, namely, that the obstacles interfering with research in the form of lacunae or misrepresentations in the sources must become part of the account. In *War and Peace* just the opposite happens. Everything that precedes the act of narration (from personal reminiscences to the memorials of the Napoleonic age) is assimilated and fused to permit the reader to enter into a relationship of special intimacy with the personages and participate directly in their lives.⁵⁹ Tolstoy leaps over the inevitable gap between the fragmentary and distorted traces of an event (a battle, for instance) and the event itself. But this leap, this direct contact with reality can take place only on the terrain of invention. It is precluded by definition to the historian who only has at his disposal fragments of things and documents. The historiographical frescoes that seek to communicate to the reader, through expedients frequently mediocre, the illusion of a vanished reality, tacitly remove this constituent limitation of the historical profession. Microhistory chooses the opposite approach. It accepts the limitations while exploring their gnoseological implications and transforming them into a narrative element.

This approach had been anticipated in some respects by the Italian critic Renato Serra, in a brief but important essay written in 1912 and published posthumously: "Partenza di un gruppo di soldati per la

59. See Viktor Shklovskii, *Materiali e leggi di trasformazione stilistica: Saggio su "Guerra e pace,"* trans. Monica Guerrini (Parma, 1978).

Libia.”⁶⁰ In a letter to Benedetto Croce, Serra explained that he had started from Tolstoy’s ideas on history as expressed in *War and Peace*.⁶¹ In an article later included in the volume *History: Its Theory and Practice* Croce had repudiated Tolstoy’s position, defining it as absurd and skeptical: “we know at every moment all the history that we need to know”; consequently, the history that we do not know is identical to “the eternal phantom of the ‘thing in itself.’”⁶² Serra, in sarcastically defining himself “a slave to the thing in itself,” confessed to Croce that he felt much closer to Tolstoy, “only that,” he added, “my difficulties are, or seem to be, more complex.”⁶³

In effect, “Partenza” hearkens back to ideas of Tolstoy (without naming him) but takes them in a completely different direction. Gruff letters from soldiers to their families, newspaper articles written for the pleasure of a distant public, accounts of military actions hurriedly scribbled by an impatient captain, the reworking by historians full of superstitious veneration for each of these documents: all these narratives, independently of their more or less direct character, have (Serra explains) a highly problematic relationship with reality. In sentences that become little by little more hurried and almost feverish Serra registers the rhythm of a thought that turns around the unresolved contradiction between the certainty of the existence of the “thing in itself” and distrust in the possibility of attaining it by means of the evidence:

There are people who imagine in good faith that a document can be the expression of reality. . . . As if a document could express something different *from itself*. . . . A document is a fact. The battle is another fact (an infinity of other facts). The two cannot make *one*. . . . The man who acts is *a fact*. And the man who narrates is *another fact*. . . . Every piece of evidence provides testimony only of itself; of its proper moment, of its proper origin, of its proper end, and of nothing else. . . . All the critical judgments to which we subject history involve the concept of true history, of absolute reality. It is necessary to face up to the question of memory; not in so far as it is forgetfulness, but in so far as it is *memory*. Existence of things in themselves.⁶⁴

60. See Renato Serra, “Partenza di un gruppo di soldati per la Libia,” *Scritti letterari, morali e politici*, ed. Mario Isnenghi (Turin, 1974), pp. 278–88. Here I am returning to observations that I made in “Just One Witness,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), pp. 94–95.

61. See Serra, letter to Benedetto Croce, 10 Oct. 1912, *Epistolario di Renato Serra*, ed. Luigi Ambrosini, Giuseppe De Robertis, Alfredo Grilli (Florence, 1934), pp. 453–54.

62. Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (1915; New York, 1960), p. 55.

63. Serra, letter to Croce, 11 Nov. 1912, *Epistolario di Renato Serra*, p. 459. Serra’s differences with Croce have been noted by Eugenio Garin, “Serra e Croce,” in *Scritti in onore di Renato Serra: Per il cinquantenario della morte* (Florence, 1974), pp. 85–88.

64. Serra, “Partenza di un gruppo di soldati per la Libia,” pp. 286–87.

14. I read Serra's piece only at the beginning of the 1980s. But the gist of it had reached me more than twenty years earlier through Arsenio Frugoni's teaching in Pisa. In his book *Arnaldo da Brescia nelle fonti del secolo XII* (1954) he had shown how the specific perspective of each narrative source contributes to present the same personage in an alternating, different light.⁶⁵ Today I feel that Frugoni's sarcasm over the naive efforts by positivist erudites to make the pieces fit together had as its point of departure Serra's antipositivist polemic ("Every piece of evidence provides testimony only of itself; of its proper moment, of its proper origin, of its proper end, and of nothing else"), which it sought to surpass in its skeptical implications.

I am not certain that Frugoni knew Serra's "Partenza." But that it had been read by Italo Calvino seems to me to be obvious from his "Ricordo di una battaglia" (1974), a writing of a completely different kind.⁶⁶ "It is necessary to face up to the question of memory," Serra had written. Calvino takes up the question, even if his battle is an episode of partisan warfare that he is recalling at a distance of almost thirty years. At first everything seems clear to him, easily within reach: "It is not true that I no longer remember anything, my memories are still there, hidden in the gray matter of the brain." ("R," p. 75). But the negative statement ("It is not true") shows that he is already assailed by doubt, that recollections crumble as memory brings them to light:

And my fear now is that as soon as some remembrance forms, it will immediately appear in a faulty light, contrived, war and youth as sentimental as always, and become a segment in the story with the style of that time, which cannot tell us how things really were but only how we thought we saw them and said them. ["R," pp. 81–82]

Can memory abolish the mediation constituted by the illusions and distortions of our self of a bygone time to attain "things in themselves"? The conclusion echoes, with a bitterly ironic twist, the false confidence of the beginning: "Everything that I have written thus far serves to make me understand that of that morning I remember almost nothing" ("R," p. 85).

The closing words of "Ricordo di una battaglia" ("The sense of everything that appears and disappears" ["R," p. 85]) underline the precariousness of our relationship with the past. And yet that "almost nothing"

65. See Arsenio Frugoni, *Arnaldo da Brescia nelle fonti del secolo XII* (1954; Torino, 1989), and Ginzburg, "Proofs and Possibilities: In the Margins of Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*," trans. Anthony Guneratne, *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1988): 114–27.

66. See Calvino, "Ricordo di una battaglia," *La strada di San Giovanni* (Milan, 1990), pp. 75–85; hereafter abbreviated "R." The story was first published in *Corriere della Sera*, 25 Apr. 1974, the anniversary of the liberation. The printing of Isnenghi's Einaudi edition was completed on 16 Feb. 1974.

suggests that the past, despite everything, is not unattainable. For me, who learned much from Calvino, this conclusion is important subjectively as well as objectively to explode the current image of Calvino (the later Calvino) as a postmodernist writer. The laborious and painful autobiographical reflection that takes form in the "Ricordo di una battaglia" provides us with an image of him very different from the skeptical euphoria now in fashion.

15. In a recent essay in *History and Theory*, F. Ankersmit, a Dutch student of historiographical theory, argued that the tendency to concentrate attention on scraps rather than on larger entities is the most typical expression of "postmodernist historiography."⁶⁷ To elucidate this point Ankersmit used a vegetal metaphor (one that actually goes back to Namier, and perhaps to Tolstoy).⁶⁸ In the past historians were preoccupied with the trunk of a tree or its branch; their postmodernist successors busy themselves only with the leaves, namely, with minute fragments of the past that they investigate in an isolated manner, independently of the more or less larger context (branches, trunk) of which they were part. Ankersmit, who accepts the skeptical notions formulated by Hayden White in the early 1970s, looks with great favor on this shift towards the fragment. In his opinion it expresses an antiessentialist or antifoundationalist attitude that brings to light (Ankersmit is not frightened by formal contradictions) the "fundamentally postmodernist nature" of historiography: activity of an artistic type that produces narratives incommensurable among themselves. The ambition to know the past has set; the significance of the fragments is sought in the present, "the way in which their pattern can be adapted to other forms of civilization existing now." As examples of this historiographical tendency Ankersmit cites two French books (Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* and Georges Duby's *Sunday of Bouvines*), an American work (Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre*), and a nonexistent book (*Microhistories*, by the undersigned).

67. F. R. Ankersmit, "Historiography and Postmodernism," *History and Theory* 28, no. 2 (1989): 149; see also pp. 143, 150. In Perez Zagorin's comment: "Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations," *History and Theory* 29, no. 3 (1990): 263-74 and Ankersmit's response, "Reply to Professor Zagorin," pp. 275-96, we read this characteristic statement (apropos such constructivist theoreticians of historiography as Oakeshott, Goldstein, and Stanford): "the past as the complex referent of the historical text as a whole has no role to play in historical debate. From the point of view of historical practice this referential past is epistemically a useless notion. . . . Texts are all we have and we can only compare texts with texts" (p. 281).

68. "Toynbee relates that Namier once told him: 'Toynbee, I study the individual leaves, you the tree. The rest of the historians study the clusters of branches, and we both think *they* are wrong'" (Kracauer, *History*, p. 110). But see also the passage in Tolstoy's diary quoted by Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," p. 30. For a precocious formulation of Namier's program to study "individual leaves" (the members of the House of Commons), see L. B. Namier, "The Biography of Ordinary Men" (1928), *Skyscrapers and Other Essays* (London, 1931), pp. 44-53.

In the past decade Giovanni Levi and I have repeatedly argued against the relativist positions, including the one warmly espoused by Ankersmit, that reduce historiography to a textual dimension, depriving it of any cognitive value.⁶⁹ There is no contradiction between this polemic and the debt I have acknowledged in these pages towards Calvino and more generally towards the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel. The experimental attitude that brought together, at the end of the 1970s, the group of Italian students of microhistory (“a history with additives,” as Franco Venturi ironically dubbed it) was based on the definite awareness that all phases through which research unfolds are *constructed* and not *given*: the identification of the object and its importance; the elaboration of the categories through which it is analyzed; the criteria of proof; the stylistic and narrative forms by which the results are transmitted to the reader. But this accentuation of the constructive moment inherent in the research was combined with an explicit rejection of the skeptical implications (postmodernist, if you will) so largely present in European and American historiography of the 1980s and early 1990s. In my opinion the distinctive quality of Italian microhistory must be looked for in this cognitive wager.⁷⁰ I should like to add that my own work of these years, even if in large part absorbed by a book decisively macrohistoric in approach (*Ecstasies*), proceeded, at least in intention, along this twofold track.

16. Piero della Francesca, Galileo, a community of nineteenth-century Piedmontese weavers, a Ligurian valley in the sixteenth century: these examples selected at random show that Italian research in microhistory has looked at subjects of acknowledged importance as well as themes that had been previously ignored or relegated to spheres considered inferior, such as local history.⁷¹ What all these investigations

69. By Levi, see “I pericoli del geertzismo,” *Quaderni storici* 58 (Apr. 1985): 269–77 and “On Microhistory.” See also my “Proofs and Possibilities”; “Veranschaulichung und Zitat: Die Wahrheit der Geschichte,” in *Der Historiker als Menschenfresser: Über den Beruf des Geschichtsschreibers* (Berlin, 1990), pp. 85–102; “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist,” *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, pp. 156–64; “Just One Witness,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, pp. 82–96; and “Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn 1991): 79–92.

70. Burke emphasizes the cultural relativism of the “new history” in “Overture,” pp. 3–4.

71. See, respectively, Ginzburg, *Indagini su Piero: Il Battesimo, il ciclo di Arezzo, la Flagellazione* (Turin, 1981), trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper, under the title *The Enigma of Piero della Francesca: The Baptism, the Arezzo Cycle, the Flagellation* (London, 1985); Pietro Redondi, *Galileo eretico* (Turin, 1983), trans. Rosenthal, under the title *Galileo Heretic* (Princeton, N.J., 1987); Franco Ramella, *Terra e telai: Sistemi di parentela e manifattura nel Biellese dell' Ottocento* (Turin, 1984); and Osvaldo Raggio, *Faide e parentele: Lo stato genovese visto dalla Fontanabuona* (Turin, 1990). Alberto M. Banti, “Storie e microstorie: L'Histoire sociale contemporaine en Italie [1972–1989],” trans. Susanna Magri, *Genèses* 3 (Mar. 1991): 134–47, esp. p. 145, emphasizes the presence in Italian microhistory of two tendencies, centered respectively on the analysis of social structure and of cultural implications. Banti assigns to my essay “Clues” some of the responsibility for the ultimate failure of the microhistorical paradigm (the true one, the first of the two mentioned).

have in common programmatically is the insistence on context, exactly the opposite of the isolated contemplation of the fragmentary advocated by Ankersmit. But while the choice of Galileo does not require any prior justification, we inevitably ask ourselves: why precisely that community, why precisely that valley? In these cases, the reference, explicit or implicit, to a comparative dimension is inevitable. Franco Ramella (*Terra e telai* [1984]) and Osvaldo Raggio (*Faide e parentele* [1990]) have shown us that the in-depth study of the Val di Mosso and of the Fontanabuona can compel us to look with different eyes at such problems as protoindustry and the birth of the modern state. But to recognize the richness of the results is still not enough. An object, as we saw, may be chosen because it is typical (González) or because it is repetitive and therefore capable of being serialized (Braudel, apropos the *fait divers*). Italian microhistory has confronted the question of comparison with a different and, in a certain sense, opposite approach: through the anomalous, not the analogous. First of all, it hypothesizes the more improbable sort of documentation as being potentially richer: the “exceptional ‘normal’” of Edoardo Grendi’s justly famous quip.⁷² Second, it demonstrates, as accomplished for example by Giovanni Levi (*L’eredità immateriale*) and by Simona Cerutti (*La Ville et les métiers*), that any social structure is the result of interaction and of numerous individual strategies, a fabric that can only be reconstituted from close observation.⁷³ It is significant that the relationship between this microscopic dimension and the larger contextual dimension became in both cases (though so diverse) the organizing principle in the narration.⁷⁴ As Kracauer had already foreseen, the results obtained in a microscopic sphere cannot be automatically transferred to a macroscopic sphere (and vice versa). This heterogeneity, the implications of which we are just beginning to perceive, constitutes both the greatest difficulty and the greatest potential benefit of microhistory.⁷⁵

17. Giovanni Levi, speaking recently of microhistory, concluded:

72. Grendi, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” p. 512.

73. The Italian subtitle of Levi’s book is *Carriera di un esorcista nel Piemonte del Seicento*. See Simona Cerutti, *La Ville et les métiers: Naissance d’un langage corporatif (Turin, 17^e–18^e siècles)* (Turin, 1992). Some of the intellectual and political implications of this research could be clarified by a parallel reading of Vittorio Foa and Pietro Marcenaro, *Riprendere tempo: Un dialogo con postilla* (Turin, 1982), the dialogue between Foa and Marcenaro also published in the *Microstorie* series. The two are not historians, contrary to what Edward Muir states in the introduction to *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, ed. Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore, 1991), p. xxii n. 7, even though Foa, politician and trade unionist, is also the author of a book of history: *La Gerusalemme rimandata: Domande di oggi agli Inglesi del primo Novecento* (Turin, 1985). After having worked as a laborer for a time, Marcenaro is once again a trade unionist.

74. Compare Revel, “L’Histoire au ras du sol,” p. xxxii and “Micro-analyse et reconstitution du social,” pp. 34–35.

75. Martin Jay has underlined this difficulty, citing Kracauer, in “Of Plots, Witnesses, and Judgments,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, p. 103. Gwyn Prins has called the “small scale” a trap, observing, “It is not there that the propulsive forces of historians’ ex-

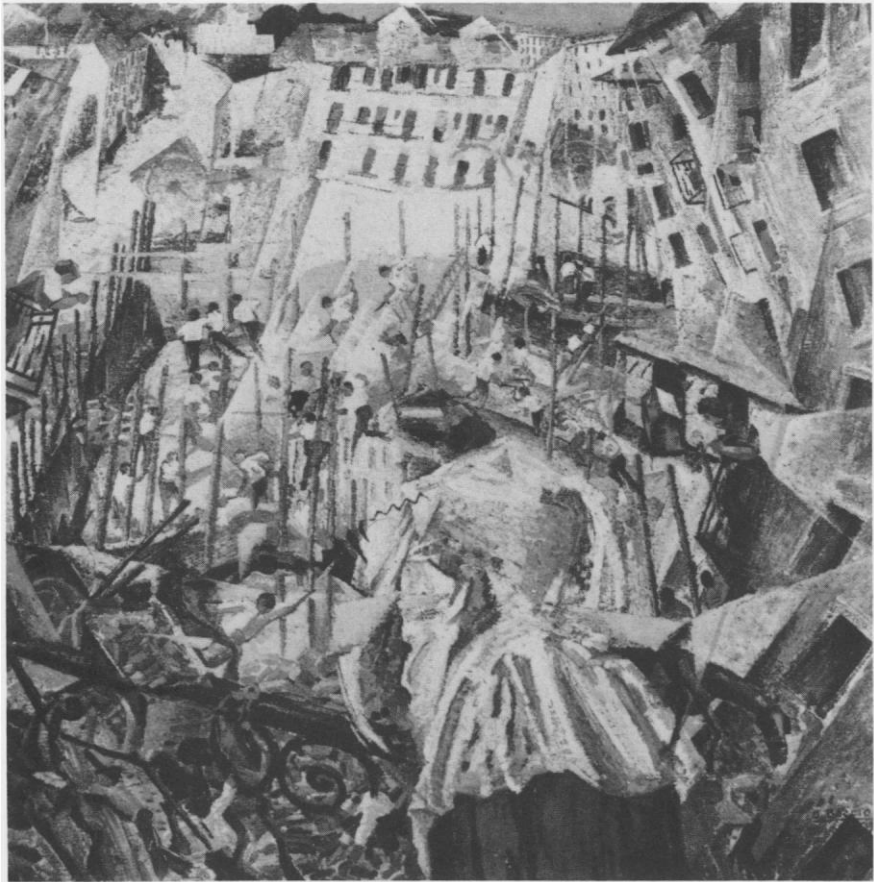


FIG. 2.—Umberto Boccioni, *The Street Enters into the House*, 1911 (Kunstmuseum Hannover mit Sammlung Sprengel, Hannover).

“this is a self-portrait, not a group portrait.”⁷⁶ I had proposed doing the same, but did not succeed. Both the boundaries of the group to which I belonged and my own boundaries of self seemed retrospectively shifting and uncertain. To my surprise I discovered how important to me were, unknowingly, books I had never read, events and persons I did not know had existed. If this is a self-portrait, then its model is Boccioni’s paintings in which the street leads into the house, the landscape into the face, and the exterior invades the interior, the “I” is porous.

planatory theories are to be found” (Gwyn Prins, “Oral History,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, p. 134).

76. Levi, “On Microhistory,” p. 111. It would be useful to have the versions of the other scholars involved in this enterprise, starting with Grendi.

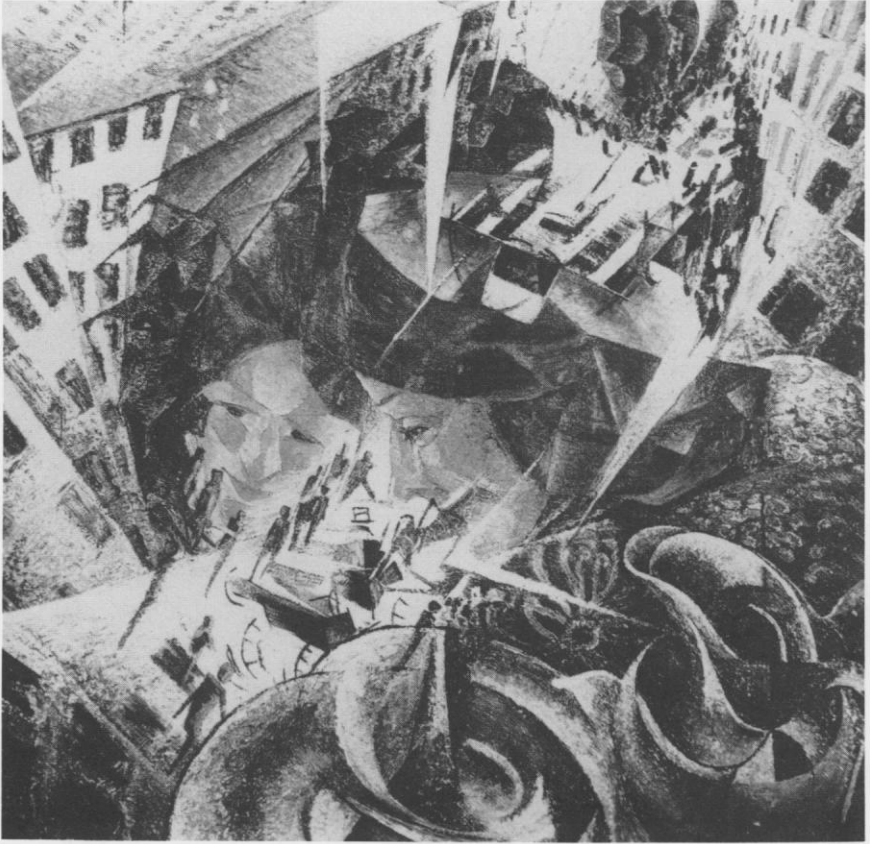


FIG. 3.—Umberto Boccioni, *Simultaneous Visions*, 1911 (Van der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal).