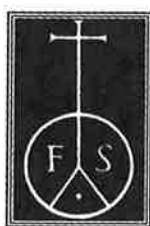


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Contents

ARTICLES

- Ian J. Aebel, *Textual Colonization: the Many American Histories of Richard Eden* 11
- Berber Bevernage, Chris Lorenz, *Breaking up Time. Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future* 31
- Mark Gamsa, *Challenges to Generalization in Historical Writing* 51

A FORUM ON CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

- Kalle Pihlainen, *Mulholland Drive and the Surrender of Representation* 71
- Paweł Wolski, *The Making of Primo Levi: Holocaust Studies as a Discursive Force of History* 91
- Hannu Salmi, *The Witness, Memory and the Truths of the Past. Modes of Narrating History in Hans Jürgen Syberberg's Winifred Wagner (1975)* 107

REVIEW ARTICLES

- Marco Platania, *Relire l'histoire coloniale au XVIII^e siècle. L'édition critique de l'Histoire des deux Indes (2010)* 125

- NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS 137

Challenges to Generalization in Historical Writing*

Mark Gamsa

ABSTRACT

This article presents and analyses strategies in late twentieth-century historiography, all of which focused on the individual person or the private case: while we shall see that there were also other connections between these approaches, it will be argued that challenging generalization was their main and shared ambition.

As it mostly developed outside of the Anglophone historiographical discourse, what may be called the 'counter-generalization' trend in historical thought during the 1990s has not gained the visibility it deserves. The discovery of the individual in post-Soviet historiography, in particular, has been little noticed in the West. I will first survey and comment on expressions of this trend in Russia. This will be followed by a consideration of the intersection of microhistory and biography, and discussion of the problem of scale, from which we would move on to the juncture of history and literature, and to chaos theory as an analogy for the limitations and potential of historical research. The writings of Jacques Revel, Carlo Ginzburg and Joseph Dan are central to these issues. To sustain the argument that the seemingly disparate methods, analysed here, may be viewed as responses to a common problem, this article concludes by explaining the reasons why historians felt the need of opposing generalization in the 1990s and sketching out where we stand with choices between generalizing and individualizing approaches today.

I. CASUS AND THE "NEW BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY"

CASUS, a historical miscellany in Russian subtitled *The Individual and Unique in History*, began publication in Moscow in 1996. It was founded and edited by the eminent medievalist Yuri Bessmertnyi (1923-2000), who had just been appointed head of a research centre on "The History of Personal and Everyday Life" in the Institute of Universal History of the Russian Academy of Sciences. *Casus* was conceived as part of the same research programme: the interest in 'personal and everyday life' had obvious connections with the German *Alltagsgeschichte*, the editor's own lifelong preoccupation with French history was matched by intense curiosity for developments in historical writing in France, and the first volume of the miscellany also made evident an orientation towards Italian historiography.¹ While several books under Bessmert-

* Reworked version of a lecture given on 4 May 2011 during the author's stay as Fernand Braudel Senior Fellow at the Department of History and Civilization, European University Institute, Florence. While none of them should be held responsible for what follows, I would like to thank Joseph Dan for meeting me for a talk at his home in Jerusalem in August 2010, as well as John Arnold and Jacques Revel for commenting on my drafts through email and in conversation in 2012. This research was supported by The Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 1258/09).

¹ See Y. L. Bessmertnyi, "Chto za 'Kazus'?" (What for a *Casus*?), *Kazus* (1996): 7-24, editor's introduction to the inaugural volume. Cf. the materials of a public discussion of this article at the Institute of Univer-

nyi's meticulous editorship came out in the second half of the 1990s, it was *Casus* that became the most noticeable manifestation of the new agenda that called for a focus on the individual in history. "The casus approach" became a familiar notion among Russian historians.² Since Bessmertnyi's death, his younger co-editor the medievalist Mikhail Boitsov has continued editing *Casus* together with the historian of medieval Russia Igor' Danilevskii. Most of the contributors to *Casus* over the years have been scholars of European history, with the most active core formed by specialists in the Middle Ages. The choice of 'miscellany' (Russian: *al'manakh*), rather than 'journal', reflected this adherence to a main thematic frame. Importantly, medievalists were proficient in European languages: among historians working predominantly with Russian materials, knowledge of German, Italian and French would have been too limited to allow for the unmediated intellectual stimulation from abroad that publications in *Casus* manifested.

The driving idea behind *Casus* was to demonstrate that the individual person was capable of taking untypical, unexpected and independent decisions whatever the pressure exerted on him or her by larger forces. A debate on the relationship between 'the micro' and 'the macro' was introduced already at the outset and remained a constant theme. In the inaugural volume of *Casus*, Yuri Bessmertnyi offered a memorable formulation of his convictions about the purpose of historical research: "to understand the people of the past"; "to approach as nearly as possible a person of another time and age".³ In a later volume, a younger colleague went some steps further in the same direction, arguing that the ultimate goal, or 'basic instinct' of the historian, was no less than to bring the dead back to life.⁴ Such concerns were no mere laboratory exercises in innovative historiography: they emerged to counter the rhetoric of Soviet history writing, which through its gallery of 'scientific' social and political abstractions had insisted on categorizing people and analysing their behaviour by labels of class. Particularly the ambition of asserting the autonomy of the individual against the demands of the state was a position that echoed patterns of intellectual resistance in the Soviet period. The group that formed around Bessmertnyi recognized in him a leader of the 'unofficial' Soviet historiography – the scholars, whose non-conformism with the Party line had been punished through their professional marginalization until the very end of the 1980s.⁵

Maintaining an affinity with historical anthropology and especially with microhistory in its Italian variety, *Casus* shared the interest of *microstoria* in a close study of the

sal History in Moscow in September 1996, placed in the end of the same issue. See also Y. L. Bessmertnyi, untitled contribution to *L'histoire et le métier d'historien en France 1945-1995*, ed. F. Bédarida (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1995), 395-397.

² N. Koposov, with O. Bessmertnaia, "Iurii L'vovich Bessmertnyi i 'novaia istoricheskaia nauka' v Rossii" (Bessmertnyi and 'New Historical Science' in Russia), *Homo historicus: k 80-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia Iu. L. Bessmertnogo* (Essays in Memory of Yuri Bessmertnyi on His 80th Anniversary), ed. A. O. Chubar'ian, 2 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 2003), vol. 1, 122-161, here 144-146.

³ See Y. L. Bessmertnyi, "Concluding Words" to the discussion of his article and the miscellany's programme, *Kazus* (1996): 316-317.

⁴ P. Iu. Uvarov, "Apokatastasis, ili Osnovnoi instinkt istorika" (Apocatastasis, or the Historian's Basic Instinct), *Kazus* (2000): 15-32.

⁵ Koposov, with Bessmertnaia, "Iurii L'vovich Bessmertnyi", 128, 132-133, 137; cf. Y. L. Bessmertnyi, "August 1991 as Seen by a Moscow Historian, or the Fate of Medieval Studies in the Soviet Era", *American Historical Review*, vol. 97, 3 (June 1992): 803-816.

individual *per se*, as opposed to the analysis of particular 'cases' for the sake of making cumulative generalizations about the collective. The method *Casus* favoured was that of many-angled, 'thick' description; its editors looked for original topics, fresh interpretations and writing uncontaminated by clichés.⁶ Opening up its pages for a conversation between historians of different generations, the miscellany welcomed controversy. This quality together with playfulness and unconventionality allowed the first issues of *Casus* to enjoy a wider circulation than that of many 'established' historical periodicals.

Also a medievalist by training and professor at the Institute of Universal History, Lorina Repina contributed to *Casus* and shared some of its original platform, but then moved in another, theoretically more sharply defined direction. Repina specializes in intellectual history and is the editor of *Dialog so vremenem. Al'manakh intellektual'noi istorii* (Dialogue with Time: Intellectual History Review), published since 1999. She is a speaker for the 'new biographical history' and within that, for what she and others have called "personal history".⁷ This approach finds the study of the individual person's life valuable not only because, by being 'typical', it could reveal something about 'the age' or 'the society' – which would have been the method of a more conventional historical biography. Rather, it holds that an untypical life thoroughly studied, whether of a marginal personality or of a monarch, may both illuminate from new angles the history of a period *and* demonstrate the way in which the personal interacts with the social, the private with the public.⁸

In wanting to situate the single life within its broadest context, Repina's understanding of 'personal history' carries the notion further away from microhistory and the intellectual platform of *Casus*. It is certainly in disagreement with Boitsov's polemical justification of conducting research on isolated 'fragments' of history, a provocative stance which Bessmertnyi, too, had found exaggerated.⁹ One might venture

⁶ M. A. Boitsov and O. I. Togoeva, "Delo Kazusa" (The *Casus* File), *Srednie veka*, vol. 68, 4 (2007): 149-159.

⁷ L. P. Repina, "'Personal'naia istoriia': biografiia kak sredstvo istoricheskogo poznaniia" ("Personal History": Biography as a Means of Historical Knowledge), originally in *Kazusa* (1999): 76-100; shortened version as "Ot 'istorii odnoi zhizni' k 'personal'noi istorii'" (From 'The History of One Life' to 'Personal History'), *Istoriia cherez lichnost'. Istoriicheskaia biografiia segodnia* (supplied English title: History through Personality: Historical Biography Today), ed. L. P. Repina, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Kvadriga, 2010), 55-74. In her preface, "Lichnost' i obshchestvo, ili istoriia v biografiakh. Vmesto predisloviia" (Personality and Society, or History in Biographies: Instead of an Introduction; earlier version in *Dialog so vremenem*, 5, 2001), *Istoriia cherez lichnost'*, at 13-14, Repina distinguishes her approach to "personal history" from another, "existential" interpretation, which would concentrate on an individual's psychology to the exclusion of social and political contexts. Repina's opponent here is D. M. Volodikhin, ed. of the volume *Personal'naia istoriia* (Personal History) (Moscow: Manufaktura, 1999).

⁸ The examples from historical practice that Repina cites in support of these positions include P. S. Seaver, *Wellington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-century London* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), S. Heller Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), N. Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margin: Three Seventeenth-century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) and above all J. Le Goff, *Saint Louis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996). For a recent use of the term, cf. J. Hatcher, *The Black Death: A Personal History* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2008).

⁹ The heated polemics around Boitsov's "Vpered, k Gerodotu!" (Forward, to Herodotus!), in *Kazusa* (1999): 17-75, included responses by Repina as well as by Bessmertnyi, who defined here one of the key missions of historical analysis as "to discern in an individual's opinions (or actions) his/her interpretation of impulses from global structures" (67). A German version of this article is available: M. A. Bojcov, "Vorwärts zu Herodot! Zum Selbstverständnis russischer Historiker heute", *Rechtshistorisches Journal*, vol. 20 (2001): 351-378.

to locate the 'new biographical' or 'personal' history, as interpreted by its proponents in Russia, at midway between microhistory and historical biography.

An important precursor of *Casus* in announcing the quest for the human and individual in Russian historical writing was the miscellany *Odysseus*, subtitled *Man in History*, which from its foundation in 1989 was edited by the distinguished medievalist Aron Gurevich (1924-2006). Gurevich was another leading light of the 'unofficial' historiography, who before Perestroika had not been permitted to teach at Moscow universities.¹⁰ Yuri Bessmertnyi was a close collaborator in *Odysseus* until leaving it in 1995, to create 'his own' platform with the launch of *Casus* in the following year. One way of characterizing the intellectual atmosphere of that period would be by mentioning the Memorial Society: among the most notable voluntary organizations to evolve out of the late Soviet public sphere and still active today, with branches in Moscow and St Petersburg. It was established in 1988 with the purpose of salvaging the memory of persons whose names, along with their lives, were obliterated in the Stalinist purges and subsequent repressions. For Memorial associates, the victims of state terror had to be identified and their aborted biographies exhumed not only for the sake of their surviving relatives but also so as to make a new, human-centred history possible.¹¹ Attention to "personality" (Russian: *lichnost'*) was indeed one of the watchwords of the Perestroika years,¹² while looking to the West for models was a common orientation also beyond the historical profession.

After 1996, *Odysseus* reduced the extent of its preoccupation with theory,¹³ but *Casus* and (from 1999) *Dialogue with Time* continued to exhibit an interest for historiographical debates in Europe and the United States. As despite improved communications since the 1990s, developments in Russian historical writing have not received their due attention in the West, such interest cannot be described as mutual.

II. BIOGRAPHY, MICROHISTORY AND SCALE

It may be recalled that some of the strongest critique of biography came from the *Annales* historians in France, in whose view the genre was too closely associated with the old-fashioned political history they sought to replace.¹⁴ Attacking the methods of narrative history as well as the conception of history as a series of events, adherents of the *Annales* aimed to cover far longer stretches of time than the limited ex-

¹⁰ See now Y. Mazour-Matusevich and A. S. Korros, eds., *Saluting Aron Gurevich: Essays in History, Literature and Other Related Subjects* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

¹¹ The Memorial Society has regularly published *Books of Memory* (*Knigi pamiati*), listing the names of executed prisoners in different regions of the Soviet Union; one of its guiding aims is formulated as "the right for a name" (*pravo na imia*). In 1999, the Society began staging competitions for historical papers by high school students under the title (identical to the subtitle of *Odysseus*) "Man in History" (*Chelovek v istorii*): Russia in the Twentieth Century".

¹² I. D. Chechel', "Istoricheskie predstavleniia sovetskogo obshchestva epokhi perestroiki" (Historical Conceptions of Soviet Society in the Perestroika Era), *Obrazy istoriografii* (Images of Historiography), ed. A. P. Logunov (Moscow: RGGU, 2001), 199-234, at 206-211.

¹³ A. V. Sveshnikov and B. E. Stepanov, "Vospominanie o budushchem (k 20-letiiu *Odisseia*)" (A Memory of the Future: On the Twentieth Anniversary of *Odysseus*), *Odissei: Chelovek v istorii* (2008): 444-457.

¹⁴ J. Jennings, "'Le retour des émigrés'? The Study of the History of Political Ideas in Contemporary France", *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, eds. D. Castiglione and I. Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 204-227, at 208, 211.

panse, during which people are born, live and die.¹⁵ Much as Fernand Braudel – no stranger, himself, to biographical writing on European kings – dismissed the history of ‘events’, so he did the lives of ordinary individuals, considering them unable to make an impact on the long-term structure of history. His was, accordingly, a plea for ‘anonymous history’.¹⁶ While the *Annales* championed a new awareness of the neglected masses in history, their preoccupation was with the plural not the singular form. Rejection of the traditional emphasis on the ‘human’ dimension in the humanities culminated with French poststructuralist theory, which at its most radical announced the ‘death of the subject’ and ‘death of the author’, calling for the substitution of such outdated values by the study of discursive practices.

In turn, Italian microhistory was sceptical of the pretensions of the *Annales* to produce a ‘histoire totale’. Its emergence in the late 1970s was partly a response to the French challenge: grounded in the circumstances of Italian politics and the institutional conditions of the historical profession in Italy, ideologically it also represented a more humanist vision of historical writing.¹⁷ Already because it operated on a reduced scale of enquiry, microhistory had much in common with biography. Like the writer of a biography, who needs to situate his or her hero in ‘context’, the microhistorian aiming to achieve more than the analysis of a case study must deal with the tension between what has been called the micro and macro levels.¹⁸ Biography and microhistory alike rely on narrative for the unraveling of their ‘story’: this brings both into an ambivalent relationship with literature. By focusing on the singular, be it a person or a location, both approaches are ways of rethinking generalization in relation to scale. Giovanni Levi recently placed this problem at the centre of the microhistorical endeavour: “historians should not generalize their answers and the real definition of history is that of a discipline that generalizes its questions, that is, a discipline that poses questions which have a general significance and yet recognizes that infinite local answers are possible”.¹⁹

While biography and microhistory have been combined in actual historical practice, the affinity between them has hardly been conceptualized in theory.²⁰ The in-

¹⁵ Cf. a defense of the biographical method from its critique by Braudel and the *Annales* school, in D. Beales, “History and Biography: An Inaugural Lecture” (1980), *History and Biography: Essays in Honour of Derek Beales*, eds. T. C. W. Blanning and D. Cannadine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 266–283, at 268–269, 282.

¹⁶ As Paul Ricoeur summarized Braudel’s position, “the most superficial history is history concerned with the dimension of individuals”. P. Ricoeur, from “The Eclipse of Narrative”, in his *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, excerpted in R. M. Burns, ed., *Historiography: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, 5 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), vol. 2, 307.

¹⁷ On the humanist agenda of *microstoria*, see J. Brewer, “Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life”, *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 7, 1 (March 2010): 87–109, at 100–102. With regard to the ethical concerns that he considers central to Ginzburg’s work, Tony Molho uses the term “humanist Marxism” in “Carlo Ginzburg: Reflections on the Intellectual Cosmos of a 20th-century Historian”, *History of European Ideas*, vol. 30, 1 (March 2004): 121–148, at 139.

¹⁸ For an original discussion of the ‘micro-macro’ interaction in a single book, by the historian Richard Cobb (1917–1996), see C. Chin, “Margins and Monsters: How Some Micro Cases Lead to Macro Claims”, *History and Theory*, vol. 50, 3 (October 2011): 341–357.

¹⁹ F. Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?”, *California Italian Studies*, vol. 2, 1 (2011), cites this from an interview with Levi in *Microstoria: A venticinque anni da L’eredità immateriale*, ed. P. Lanaro (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2011), 175 (translation amended).

²⁰ “Little has been published so far about the relationship between biography and microhistory”. H.

tensive exploration of these two approaches in Russian publications, in particular by scholars affiliated with *Dialogue with Time* and *Casus*, is therefore all the more noteworthy. Whereas the inspiration for Russian 'new biographical history' seems to come mostly from English-language sources, Carlo Ginzburg, in a talk given at the invitation of the editors of *Casus* during his visit in Moscow in November 2003, singled out words from the journal's motto, "not so much the usual, but the unexpected", saying that they could serve as a "micromanifesto of microhistory".²¹

Comparison with the juncture of biography and history in current Anglophone writing would go beyond the remit of this article. It may still be worthwhile to note the succession of recently published works of urban history, in which the main title, the name of a city, is followed by the subtitle 'biography', such as *London: The Biography* by Peter Ackroyd, or *Paris: Biography of a City* by Colin Jones, to ask whether their use of 'biography' could be filled with more substance than is usually the case.²² The founding father of the genre was probably Christopher Hibbert (1924-2008), a respected popular historian and biographer of London (the book that started his city biographies in 1969 and was one of the first urban histories to carry this subtitle), Rome, Venice, Florence, Garibaldi, Mussolini and a host of British monarchs. In the surveyable and bounded space, the large social and architectural aggregate that a city is, can biography and history really meet?²³

As a human life lasts shorter than the 'life' of most cities, which properly unfolds in the *longue durée*, the biography of a city resident may hardly be told alongside that of London or Florence. One original way of overcoming this difficulty has been demonstrated by Ol'ga Kosheleva, who has been a contributor to *Casus*, in a study of St Petersburg: a microhistory of the newly-founded capital in the early eighteenth century written as a collective biography of its first inhabitants.²⁴ Another possibility would be to focus, choosing a distinctive period in a city's history, on an individual

Renders and B. de Haan, "The Limits of Representativeness: Biography, Life Writing and Microhistory", *Storia della Storiografia*, 59-60 (2011): 32-42, at 40-41.

²¹ C. Ginzburg, "Moia mikroistoriia" (My Microhistory), *Kazus* (2005): 343-353, at 344. Consider also Ginzburg, "Ein Plädoyer für den Kasus", in J. Süßmann et al., eds., *Fallstudien: Theorie - Geschichte - Methode* (Berlin: Trafo, 2007), 29-48. Russian studies in microhistory include Y. L. Bessmertnyi, ed., *Istoriia i poiske. Mikro- i makropodkhody k izucheniiu proshlogo* (supplied English title: The Historian in Search: Micro- and Macro-Approaches to Studying the Past) (Moscow: IVI RAN, 1999); and S. Zenkin, "Mikroistoriia i filologiia" (Microhistory and Philology), *Kazus* (2006): 365-377, an admiring if critical study of Ginzburg's method.

²² P. Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000); C. Jones, *Paris: Biography of a City* (London: Allen Lane, 2004). Cf. A. Read and D. Fisher, *Berlin: Biography of a City* (London: Hutchinson, 1994), L. Hughes Turnbull, *Sydney: Biography of a City* (Milsons Point, N.S.W., London: Random House Australia, 1999), W. S. Logan, *Hanoi: Biography of a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), M. Ravinder Frost and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography* (Hong Kong University Press and National Museum of Singapore, 2009), D. A. Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography* (University of Chicago Press, 2009) and S. Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011).

²³ For brief comments on the recent "biographies of continents, countries, and cities", as well as of objects, foodstuffs etc., see B. Caine, *Biography and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 124. See also Kate Brown's reflections in an AHR roundtable, "Historians and Biography": K. Brown, "A Place in Biography for Oneself", *American Historical Review*, vol. 114, 3 (June 2009), 596-605.

²⁴ O. Kosheleva, *Liudi Sankt-Peterburgskogo ostrova Petrovskogo vremeni* (The People of St Petersburg Island in the Time of Peter the Great) (Moscow: OGI, 2004). On this study as "the best work of microhistory done with Russian material", see M. M. Krom, *Istoricheskaia antropologiia* (Historical Anthropology), 3rd revised ed. (St Petersburg and Moscow: European University and Kvadriga, 2010), 168-169.

whose passage through it not only fitted into the same chronological framework but also echoed some of the preoccupations of public life. Such an approach appealed to me when dealing with the complex history of Harbin, a railway city founded by tsarist Russia in Northeastern China (the region long known as Manchuria). A sprawling metropolis and capital of Heilongjiang Province in the People's Republic of China today, Harbin was a mixed Russian-Chinese city as well as home to the representatives of many other ethnicities from its beginnings in 1898 to the consolidation of Chinese Communist rule in the 1950s. Writing 'the history of a city', tout court, seemed to me to lose the human dimension, to sacrifice the concrete to the general – all the more so, as I had a fascinating individual story to tell. The difficulty I was still facing was essentially one of scale: it is in this respect that another 'counter-generalizing' strategy of the 1990s has offered historians new ideas, conceptualizing the interaction between the big story and the small under the heading of "jeux d'échelles", or "games with scales".

Jeux d'échelles: La micro-analyse à l'expérience was the title of a collective volume by historians and anthropologists, which Jacques Revel edited in 1996. The study of individual life, in conjunction with the problem of scale, was debated in several articles in this volume, which also included a microhistorical study in city history²⁵ and became something of a milestone in the new thinking about 'the micro and the macro'. As Revel acknowledged in his introduction, contributors to *Jeux d'échelles* were actually divided in their stand on the significance of these two levels. For himself, the micro and the macro complemented each other: history consisted of both, switching between the two levels allowed for a richer analysis and there was no conflict. This he called the "relativist position", whereas the other position, which he called "fundamentalist", postulated the *precedence* of the micro over the macro: in simple terms, the "fundamentalists" were saying that it was at the small scale that things were really happening and could be fruitfully studied.²⁶

Jeux d'échelles did not furnish solutions for the use of the practitioner.²⁷ It does make stimulating reading and can help historians put a name on their dilemmas. The remaining problem, assuming you have applied ideas from *Jeux d'échelles* to successfully resolve, or at least think through the problem of scale, is this: having duly modulated your scale to the level of the individual or the small social unit, and

²⁵ See S. Cerutti, "Processus et expérience: individus, groupes et identités à Turin, au XVIIe siècle", *Jeux d'échelles: La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, ed. J. Revel (Paris: Gallimard / Le Seuil, 1996), 161-186. A revised and enlarged Russian version of Cerutti's article appeared in J. Schlumbohm, M. Krom and T. Sokoll, eds., *Proshloe - krupnym planom: sovremennyye issledovaniia po mikroistorii* (The Past on a Large Scale: Contemporary Studies in Microhistory) (European University at St Petersburg and Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte, Göttingen: Aletheia, 2003), 27-57. For Revel's perspective on biography and history, cf. his "La biographie comme problème historiographique", *Biographie schreiben*, ed. H. E. Bödeker (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003), 329-348.

²⁶ Revel, "Présentation", in his, ed., *Jeux d'échelles*, 13. For Revel's own views on the absence of an opposition between the global and the local, the macro and micro, see his "Micro-analyse et construction du social", *Jeux d'échelles*, at 26, 30, now also available in J. Revel, *Un parcours critique: douze exercices d'histoire sociale* (Paris: Éditions Galaade, 2006), 56-84. A Russian translation of this essay was published in *Odissei* (1996): 110-127.

²⁷ A retrospective published in 2009, an echo of the Italian edition of the book in 2006 as *Giochi di scala*, was critical in tone, partly for the reasons suggested below. See "Jeux d'échelles. Une histoire internationale", *Revue de synthèse*, vol. 130, 4 (2009): 661-677.

now anticipating the move from the micro to the macro level of analysis, you may discover that the small scale does not deliver quite what you had expected from it. For if what you are trying to do is to explain why things happened, you will always be making no more than educated guesses: while you may challenge generalization by collecting all the data about your single village or the hero of your biography, history is no empirical science. Rather, it bears comparison with the 'new science' of chaos: first, because the individual person, that smallest unit on the micro scale, is not an integral rational whole and second, because much of 'what happens' is unforeseen – only from the historian's vantage point does it acquire the inevitability of a past event.

III. THE CHALLENGE OF LITERATURE, AND CHAOS THEORY

In a chapter in *Jeux d'échelles* entitled "Biography as a Problem", Sabina Loriga demonstrated how, even as literature in the twentieth century explored the full complexity of modern personality, history and historical biography tended to dissimulate the same findings. Only at the cost of denying that a person's actions can stem from any number of impulses that are often unconscious and inexplicable even to him- or herself; by smoothing out contradictions and substituting a generalized "context" for the individual's unknowable private selves, could the historian construct the illusion of an "identity" so as to produce a unified character, whose "development" admitted of a coherent, linear description.²⁸ Literature, however, has done more than – under the influence of modern psychology and philosophy – show us our fractured selves, "the disorder inside".

Especially with the historical novel, though not in that form alone, literature has long used the method of inserting an individual (be it an imaginary person or a reimagined historical figure) into the fabric of the past. Authors of fiction and drama, rather than only historians, write on history – and when doing so, they need not give answers but can develop hypotheses. The writer's 'story', built up with the powers of the imagination, differs from our 'history' in its most fundamental presupposition: while it may integrate and make use of what the writer considers to have been the historical truth, it is not ethically and professionally bound to it as historians still are despite the distance separating them today from the Rankean obligation to report on "what really happened".²⁹ This difference notwithstanding, narrative also has a function in history writing and the problems of its use have been debated enough since the

²⁸ S. Loriga, "La biographie comme problème", *Jeux d'échelles*, 209-231, esp. 228-231. See now S. Loriga, *Le petit X. De la biographie à l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 2010); and cf. G. Strawson, *Selves: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics*, revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁹ On the abiding distinction between history and literature, see e.g. Roger Chartier's intervention in the pages of *Odysseus*, "Istoriia segodnia: somneniia, vyzovy, predlozheniia" (History Today: Doubts, Challenges, Proposals), trans. I. F. Dubrovskii, *Odissei* (1995): 192-205, at 203-204. In his "Polemicheskie zametki" (Polemical Notes) on Chartier's article, the senior Russian scholar of the Renaissance Leonid Batkin expressed complete agreement with Chartier on this point (*Odissei* [1995]: 208); Aron Gurevich, too, drew boundaries between history and literary fiction in "Territorii istorika" (the title refers to E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Territoire de l'historien*), *Odissei* (1996): 81-109, here at 87. On the historian as a teller of 'true stories', cf. J. H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

1970s.³⁰ Carlo Ginzburg has both countered critique such as Hayden White's by calling attention to the existence of other kinds of historical narration than that "based on late-nineteenth-century realist novels" and, a rare voice among historians, insisted on the instrumental value of literary fiction for history writing.³¹ In the troubled relationship between history and literature, the most troubling matter yet may be not 'the form' but 'the content': can we follow writers into admitting that the lives of real people, not only of fictional characters, are unpredictable even as they make their free choices? This would include the lives of the historical agents, on whom we write assuming that their actions are amenable to explanation by rational reasoning, as well as our own.

While writers and philosophers may now be more willing than ever before to entertain ideas of contingency and 'multiple selves', these are still suppositions to which many, historians included, have an innate resistance. Given the alternatives of interpreting their biographies as a chain of accidents on the one hand and as meaningful wholes, on the other, even people whose life course has been marked by suffering intense hardship and injustice will prefer to believe that Fate, not meaningless contingency or the arbitrary violence of a state machine, gave shape to their life as they have lived it. In Alasdair MacIntyre's formulation, life is a story and can, in turn, be told, because "we all live out narratives in our lives and [...] understand our lives in terms of the narratives that we live out".³² Despite the onetime aspiration of Mr Beebe in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908), a *History of Coincidence* is yet to be written.³³ Nor are many historians likely to subscribe to a conception of history such as Leo Tolstoy's, which Isaiah Berlin interpreted as denial of causality in favor of "fatalism" in historical explanation.³⁴

³⁰ The oft-cited essay by L. Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History", *Past & Present*, vol. 85 (1979): 3-24, is collected in G. Roberts, ed., *The History and Narrative Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001), 281-298.

³¹ See C. Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things that I Know about It" (1993), in his *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive*, trans. A. C. Tedeschi and J. Tedeschi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 204 (the quoted reference counters the assumptions of Stone's essay), and review of *Threads and Traces* by P. Anderson, "The Force of the Anomaly", *London Review of Books*, vol. 34, 8 (26 April 2012). See also interview with Ginzburg in M. L. G. Pallares-Burke, ed., *The New History: Confessions and Conversations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

³² From his *After Virtue* (1981). Critics of narrative history have attacked such positions: their views and MacIntyre's are contrasted and analyzed in D. Carr, "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity" (1986), in Roberts, ed., *The History and Narrative Reader*, 143-156.

³³ E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View*, ed. O. Stallybrass (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), 147. In response to the talkative pastor's remarks on "coincidence", young George Emerson asserts that "everything is Fate. We are flung together by Fate, drawn apart by Fate" (147); in the last pages of the novel, the side of coincidence against Fate is taken up by Lucy, now George's wife (227, 229). A recent 'history of coincidence' by a popular scientist, rather than a historian, is L. Mlodinow, *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).

³⁴ Writing *War and Peace*, Tolstoy rejected the view that the outcomes of battles were determined by the personal bravery or grand strategies of generals. I. Berlin, "Tolstoy and History", in his *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1953), has been inspirational for microhistory, as pointed out by J. Schlumbohm, "Mikrogeschichte - Makrogeschichte: Zur Eröffnung einer Debatte", in his, ed., *Mikrogeschichte Makrogeschichte: komplementär oder inkommensurabel?* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 1998), 15, n. 6. See the chapter on Tolstoy in Loriga, *Le petit X* and H. White, "War and Peace: Against Historical Realism", in Q. Edward Wang and F. L. Fillafer, eds., *The Many Faces of Clio: Cross-cultural Approaches to Historiography, Essays in Honor of Georg G. Iggers* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), 42-58.

Fiction writers do rely on causality, advancing their plots through chains of events. Few used this device openly when writers still aimed at immersing the reader in the world of fiction by making their story seem as 'real' as if it were an extension of the reader's own. Coincidence had a role and part in every realist novel, but could not be spoken of as an invention of the writer's because the latter was presumed absent from the universe he created, just as God was from his: the right word for chance was then 'providence'. Laying bare the mechanics of literary construction has only become possible once a new aesthetics of postmodern storytelling had given up some of the premises of realism and made a virtue of self-awareness.³⁵

For an example of reflection on the role of chance in human life, consider a novel by the Spanish writer Antonio Muñoz Molina, *Sefarad* (2001).³⁶ Chance, "trivial coincidence", says the writer, will save one soldier in a battle where his friends are killed; let Pablo Casals find Bach's cello suites in a shop in Barcelona, or make a person randomly picked out from among the living contract an incurable disease. Muñoz Molina draws on what he presents as his own life story, uses the biographies and autobiographies of real people, and invents a cast of other characters. The intellectual depth of this writing is such that it cannot be brushed aside: it will not do to respond that the reflections of a novelist on history are irrelevant for historians, who need not be concerned with literature.

A novel by the contemporary Israeli writer Meir Shalev, *Esau* (1991), acknowledges the troubling consequences of "one thing leading to another" in what amounts to a sustained meditation on chaos.³⁷ For the Italian author Claudio Magris, straddling literature, biography and history in his *Microcosms* (1997), "the unpredictability and randomness of life" and "the chaos that dominates the universe" are the shaking foundations of our human condition.³⁸ It is striking how rarely these basic uncertainties have been confronted by practicing historians. Whereas literature lives by the aleatory, historical writing is almost programmed to deny this dimension to the past inasmuch as history would become inexplicable (and the historian unable to put it 'in order') were it to be seen as a series of unpredictable interventions.³⁹ A scholar of religious thought, who has recently gone to the core of these problems, has done so in a minority language, which makes a summary of his contribution necessary.

³⁵ J. Lukacs, *The Future of History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), chap. 5, "History and the Novel", approaches these issues from the opposite direction, as arguing for "the historicity of fiction" he proposes to treat every novel as a potential source for historians. But he assigns such qualities only to realistic literature, claiming that "awareness of self-consciousness reflects the crisis of the novel" (112, 126).

³⁶ English translation as *Sepharad*, trans. M. Sayers Peden (Orlando: Harcourt, 2003). See esp. the chapter entitled "Berghof" and the beginning of the chapter "Narva".

³⁷ *Esau* was translated into English by B. Harshav (New York: Harper Collins, 1994). See the beginning of chap. 21, end of chap. 22, and section between chaps. 41 and 42. This novel also engages with the problems of scale (the macro and the micro) through its discussion of "micrography" (Shalev's term for miniature copies of the Holy Scriptures) as a means of facing the threat of infinity.

³⁸ C. Magris, trans. I. Halliday, *Microcosms* (London: Harvill, 1999), quoting at 32; cf. 80-81, 120, 207, 262 and more.

³⁹ In a somewhat different context, cf. the formulation of this problem in R. Anchor, "Realism and Ideology: The Question of Order", *History and Theory*, vol. 22, 2 (May 1983): 107-119: "History leaves us with a sense that things could not have happened otherwise, because in fact they did not happen otherwise" (116).

The holder of the Gershom Scholem chair at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a leading authority on Jewish mysticism, Joseph Dan published in 2009 a collection of essays bearing the title *Chaos Theory and the Science of History*.⁴⁰ Dan's paperback on chaos and history is all the more remarkable for being the byproduct of a career devoted to close empirical research. Already the opening essay, which lends its title to the book, articulates what history, in the author's conviction, can and cannot do: it is an argument against applying the conclusions of any historical inquiry beyond the concrete topic it treats and a wholesale rebuttal of claims for historical regularity, predictability or the possession of 'truth'. It is also a plea for modesty: if indeed history obeys no laws, if it cannot be modeled and knows no patterns (as nothing repeats itself in quite the same form), then we should always be ready to be surprised. There are only specific and partial findings we can offer, every conclusion is a compromise with the infinity of unconsidered cases and every claim we make about the past will rightly be subjected to revision. In distinction from earlier statements on chaos and history,⁴¹ Dan writes as a practicing intellectual historian rather than as a theorist. The main novelty of his argument lies in that he neither deploys mathematical formulations nor aims to demonstrate that chaos theory has a direct bearing on history writing. Dan does not aspire to turn history into science as, *pace* his choice of a title, he holds that history cannot (and should not try to) become that. He argues that historians could do their work better if, like the scientists who have now accepted 'chaos', they become ready to rethink and cast off some of the outworn ambitions of their profession, including that of making it 'scientific'.⁴²

When Dan draws on examples such as the impossibility of measuring a coastline, his reasoning parallels ideas that can also be found in *Jeux d'échelles*,⁴³ but his conclu-

⁴⁰ Yossef Dan, *Torat ha-ka'os u-mada' ha-historyah* (Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2009); the supplied English title has *Study* instead of the original *Science*. See esp. chap. 1, "Chaos Theory and the Science of History", chap. 5, "A Map on a 1:1 Scale", chap. 13, "History and the Historical Text: The Works of Umberto Eco", and 23, 165-166. The book draws on articles published by Dan in *Ha'aretz* newspaper (Tel Aviv) from the 1990s. Cf. J. Dan, "Chaos Theory, Lyotard's History and the Future of the Study of the History of Ideas", *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, vol. 3 (1996): 193-211.

⁴¹ See George A. Reisch, "Chaos, History, and Narrative", *History and Theory*, vol. 30, 1 (February 1991): 1-20, followed in the same issue by Donald N. McCloskey, "History, Differential Equations, and the Problem of Narration", 21-36. Both articles, however wittily written, rely on the language of mathematics and the philosophy of science; it was on the same grounds that their reasoning was questioned, and spiritedly defended again, in a second forum on chaos theory in *History and Theory*, vol. 34, 1 (February 1995): see P. A. Roth and T. A. Ryckman, "Chaos, Clio, and Scientific Illusions of Understanding": 30-44; G. A. Reisch, "Scientism Without Tears: A Reply to Roth and Ryckman": 45-58; and M. Shermer, "Exorcising Laplace's Demon: Chaos and Antichaos, History and Metahistory": 59-83, who pointed out that "no historian has produced a major work on chaos and history" (68).

⁴² In an interview with journalist Vered Li, *Ha'aretz*, 11 November 2009, Dan was asked about the connection between "chaos theory" and "the science of history", the two parts of his book's title. He replied: "There is no connection at all between chaos theory and historical research. I only used it as an analogy. Chaos theory is an example showing that there may exist an important and deep-reaching scientific theory that rules out the possibility of a precise prediction of phenomena while not being based on belief in covering laws and causality. In my opinion, correct and acceptable historical research rejects outright any possibility of prophecy making, 'historical law' and belief that every phenomenon has a set of reasons, which, if repeated, would cause the phenomenon to reoccur" (my translation from Hebrew).

⁴³ The paradigmatic example of the features of a coastline, changing along with the changes in geographical scale, is also deployed by B. Lepetit, "De l'échelle en histoire", *Jeux d'échelles*, here 85-89. Cf. Dan, *Torat ha-ka'os*, 14-15, 33-36, 130-131.

sions are more radical and iconoclastic. Inspired by the wrapping of the Reichstag building by the artist Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude in summer 1995, Dan interprets this act as the practical realization of the famous short story by Borges on a map identical in size to the empire it depicted. In the most visionary chapter of his book, entitled "A Map on a 1:1 Scale", he goes on to formulate the ideal to which he believes history should aspire. In the example he offers, this would be "to describe the French Revolution as the events of 14 July 1789 were seen through the eyes of each and every participant in it" – and the non-participants too, Dan is quick to add, because "historical non-action is no less a form of history making than historical action is". Obviously, these criteria cannot be met, but knowing that the only complete 'history' would have been a full mimesis, a 1:1 reproduction, should make historians more conscious of their limitations.⁴⁴

The challenge and potential of chaos were also central to the reevaluation of history by practitioners in Russia. Like Joseph Dan would, the editor of *Casus* Yuri Bessmertnyi insisted that history needed to acknowledge the individual's freedom of choice.⁴⁵ In April 1999 *Odysseus* organized a roundtable on virtual and potential history, where amid some merriment queries were raised such as "what would have happened if" Peter the Great had not been born and Lenin had lived longer. For a number of the discussants of chaos theory at this forum, the 'new science' signaled hope for a new historical science, as well. Thus mathematical modulations for the analysis of "what might have happened" and eventually for the forecasting of the future were advertised with reference to the thought of Ilya Prigogine (1917-2003), the Russian-born émigré in Belgium, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1977 and in his later years authored books for a wider readership, including *Order Out of Chaos* (1984) and *The End of Certainty* (1997).⁴⁶ In post-Soviet Russia Prigogine's name was mobilized in support of a still more dubious source of historiographical inspiration, publications in the field of 'synergetics', which even a scholar of Bessmertnyi's stature followed and – in a tribute to his own longstanding interest in the application of scientific methodology to history – occasionally cited.

For those who adhered to such positions (and by no means were they shared by all participants in the *Odysseus* roundtable), bringing chaos into history was no method for resisting generalization: on the contrary, it held the promise of a new overarching set of laws, a fresh philosophy to explain history and the meaning of life so as to replace the defunct Marxist gospel. It was a need that had manifested itself broadly in Russian society after Communism and one which in popular history writing – not of the kind that *Odysseus*, *Casus* or *Dialogue with Time* would ever publish – engendered

⁴⁴ Dan, *Torat ha-ka'os*, 86-87. Cf. J. L. Borges, "On Exactitude in Science", in his *Collected Fictions*, trans. A. Hurley (London: The Penguin Press, 1999), 325. Dan's ideal of history may be compared with A. C. Danto's notion of the "Ideal Chronicle": see chap. 8, "Narrative Sentences", of *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965), in his *Narration and Knowledge*, revised 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁴⁵ Dan, *Torat ha-ka'os*, 24, explicitly tied this recognition to the admission of chaos; Bessmertnyi adverted to it, with reference to synergetic theory, in his "Mnogolikaia istoriia (Problema integratsii mikro- i makropodkhodov)" (Many-faced History: The Problem of Integrating Micro and Macro Approaches), *Ka-zus* (2000): 52-61, at 53-55 and n. 11.

⁴⁶ See I. Prigogine, in collaboration with I. Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984), and, by the same two authors, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

a whole brood of pseudo-scientific theories, for which no generalization was too large. For the creative historian of medieval France, Pavel Uvarov, who chaired the roundtable for *Odysseus* (and would cause a controversy when, in the following issue of *Casus*, he would launch his idea of history's maximum goal as the reanimation of the dead), "the supporters of synergetics-chaos might well be charlatans", but chaos was nonetheless a threat that needed to be met: an "anti-chaos formula", therefore, had to be found.⁴⁷

Jacques Revel too mentioned "the presently successful chaos theories" with the remark that they had the merit of drawing the attention of the practicing historian to "the importance and complexity of non-linear processes", although he did not see in what way such theories could be of (practical) help.⁴⁸ The main argument that James Gleick made in his *Chaos: Making a New Science* (1987), however, was that the realization of randomness where we had always expected to see order could have an eye-opening (instead of a debilitating) effect; rather than frustrate the growth of science, the acceptance of 'chaos' transformed it beyond recognition.⁴⁹

Similarly, in a chapter treating the conception of history and denial of causal explanation in the first five novels by Umberto Eco, Joseph Dan commented on Eco's positive contribution to the rethinking of history. It may be added to Dan's close reading of Eco that *The Name of the Rose* effectively ends with these words, which the monk and investigating detective William addresses to Adso, the narrator: "non in commotione, non in commotione Dominus", literally, "not in confusion, not in confusion is the Lord".⁵⁰ Rather than "confusion", the word *chaos* had just come up in that last conversation between the two men, as the monastery around them burned down amid terrible destruction and Adso wondered whether admitting "chaos" was compatible with belief in God's power and ultimately in His very existence:

I dared, for the first and last time in my life, to express a theological conclusion: "But how can a necessary being exist totally polluted with the possible? What difference is there, then, between God and primigenial chaos? Isn't affirming God's absolute omnipotence and His absolute freedom with regard to His own choices tantamount to demonstrating that God does not exist?"⁵¹

William's above-cited reply to these fearful protestations (rather, the Old Testament quotation he chooses as his means to confront them) chimes well with Dan's argument that chaos theory does not imply the *denial* of knowledge and ultimately of truth by replacing an illusory order with notions of mayhem, the biblical *tohu va bohu* or "blind fate"; instead, it posits the need to acknowledge the interaction of myriad causes.⁵² Admitting the relevance of chaos theory as an analogy for history partakes of the postmodern doubt towards historical explanation, but as Dan is careful to em-

⁴⁷ P. I. Uvarov, "O nevozmozhnom i plodotvornom" (On the Impossible and Fruitful), *Kazus* (2000): 118-124, at 122-123.

⁴⁸ Revel, "Présentation", 11-12.

⁴⁹ See J. Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

⁵⁰ "Chaos" (*khaos*) is the word used to render *commotione* in the acclaimed Russian translation of the novel by E. Kostioukovitch, *Imia rozy* (St Petersburg: Symposium, 1997; first publ. 1988), 587. The English translation of *The Name of the Rose* by W. Weaver (London: Picador with Secker and Warburg, 1984), 493, keeps the Latin, a hidden quotation from Kings 1, chap. 19, verse 11.

⁵¹ U. Eco, trans. Weaver, *The Name of the Rose*, 493.

⁵² Cf. Dan, *Torat ha-ka'os*, 129-130.

phasize, it differs from radical postmodernism where the latter would go so far as to deny the sheer possibility of history writing. Chaos is not history's end but its liberation from dogma. Dan himself is a firm believer in a history that knows its limits: we can try to understand and to describe, but we can rarely explain.⁵³ Marc Bloch, who too had prioritized 'understanding' over 'explanation' in *The Historian's Craft*, would not have tied this idea to chaos. To continue Dan's innovative thinking, one may now look at the argument of William Byers, *The Blind Spot: Science and the Crisis of Uncertainty*, a new study calling on scientists to come to terms with "uncertainty, incompleteness, and ambiguity, the ungraspable, the blind spot, or the limits to reason".⁵⁴ Dan's emphatic rejection of causal explanation in history and of its logical corollary, prediction of the future on the basis of alleged historical patterns, finds another echo in remarks by Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Prize laureate in economics of 2002, in his latest book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.⁵⁵

IV. CONCLUSION: THE 1990S. SOMETHING IN THE AIR?

In Russia, historical contingency was contemplated in the 1990s well beyond the confines of academia. A prominent example was furnished by the writer Andrei Bitov (born 1937): in a book published in 1993 and earlier essays, Bitov, a specialist in Alexander Pushkin, sang the praises of the hare who supposedly crossed Pushkin's path as the young poet was about to make a clandestine visit to Petersburg from his place of exile in December 1825. Had it not been for the hare, whose appearance made the superstitious Pushkin turn back on his heels, he would have entered the capital on the eve of the Decembrist revolt, taken part in it alongside his fellow aristocrats and subsequently shared the harsh punishments meted out to them by Nicholas I. By thus saving Pushkin's life the hare gave Russia her national poet (Pushkin lived on until 1837, when he was killed in a duel at the age of thirty-seven). It therefore deserved a monument, duly erected in December 2000 on the spot where its momentous encounter with Pushkin was believed to have occurred.⁵⁶

⁵³ Dan, interview with Vered Li. In the *Odysseus* roundtable in 1999, A. I. Gurevich, "Istoriia kul'tury: beschislennye poteri i upushchennye vozmozhnosti" (The History of Culture: Countless Losses and Missed Opportunities), *Odissei* (2000), here at 56, argued that, to allow for the unpredictable and spontaneous in the past, historians may not rest contented with their constructed "explanations" (he used the German *erklären*); they must strive to reach deeper, so as to "understand" (*verstehen*) historical actors in their time and culture. In the same Diltheyan vein, albeit with reference to the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin, L.M. Batkin distinguished between the two possible aims of explanation and (hermeneutic) understanding in "Zametki o sovremennom istoricheskom razume" (Notes on the Contemporary Historical Mind), *Kazus* (2000): 62-96, at 70.

⁵⁴ Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011; quoting at 36.

⁵⁵ New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011, 218: "The idea that the future is unpredictable is undermined every day by the ease with which the past is explained [...]. The illusion that we understand the past fosters overconfidence in our ability to predict the future [...]. The idea that large historical events are determined by luck is profoundly shocking, although it is demonstrably true [...] yet the illusion of valid prediction remains intact, a fact that is exploited by people whose business is prediction – not only financial experts but pundits in business and politics too". On Bloch's commitment to "understanding", see Anderson, "The Force of the Anomaly".

⁵⁶ A. Bitov, *Vychitanie zaitsa* (Take Away the Hare) (Moscow: Olimp, 1993); an amplified second edition was published as *Vychitanie zaitsa. 1825* (Moscow: Nezavisimaia gazeta, 2001). For more on this, see the chapter on Bitov in S. Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia's Myth of a National Poet* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

The turn by a group of historians of medieval Western Europe, the people of *Odysseus* and most pronouncedly *Casus*, towards 'the personal in history', was to an important extent the reflection of an intellectual atmosphere of doubt, openness for experimentation and need to come to terms with a tragic past. It also was a counter-reaction to (and an act of shedding off the burden of) the Soviet tradition, which had imposed its immobile social categories on the historical profession right until the dissolution of the Communist system.⁵⁷ But it cannot be reduced only to its local contexts and the present article has sought to render it historiographical justice as a form of engagement by Russian historians with trends in Western scholarship. In the same years, the early 1990s, generalization was conceptualized as a problem in French writing on history, as we have seen with *Jeux d'échelles*. In Jerusalem, Joseph Dan began writing the essays for *Ha'aretz* newspaper that by 2009 would form his book on chaos and history. In Germany, biography made a noticeable comeback into the centre stage of academic history.⁵⁸

Of the four approaches we have discussed, those of *Casus*, microhistory, *jeux d'échelles* and chaos theory, three were elaborated with no or little contact with each other: while Jacques Revel was certainly well informed on microhistory, having been one of its promoters in France, only in Moscow were the new historical 'miscellanies' busy translating, debating and occasionally commissioning French, Italian, German and English-language studies in historiography. Was there something common 'in the air'? Perhaps there was: inasmuch as the early 1990s, when 'chaos' was often felt to be the most appropriate definition for the political and economic situation across Eastern Europe, were not only a period of rupture and search for new intellectual and social bearings in the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Jacques Revel saw the same decade as a time of uncertainty in French and, generally, Western history writing, as he commented on the decline of three large interpretative schemes: Marxism, structuralism and positivism. What followed was (and the expression has also been used by others) "epistemological anarchy".⁵⁹ In American historical journals, the 1990s were marked by protracted debates about the challenges of postmodernism, relativism and the linguistic turn; there was much talk of a cognitive 'crisis' in history, as in the humanities as a whole. Social history, having long been predominant, began losing some of the ground it had gained. *History and Theory* organized a forum on "chaos theory and history" in February 1991 and revisited the subject through a second forum in February 1995. As chaos theory blossomed in the sciences, it was "the

⁵⁷ A. Gurevich's attraction to the *Annales* and efforts to introduce them into Soviet history since the 1970s are partly (and correctly) interpreted as a counter-reaction to Soviet historical dogma by R. Markwick, "A.Ia. Gurevich's Contribution to Soviet and Russian Historiography: From Social-Psychology to Historical Anthropology", in Mazour-Matusevich and Korros, eds., *Saluting Aron Gurevich*, here at 61-67.

⁵⁸ S. Lässig, "Introduction: Biography in Modern History – Modern Historiography in Biography", in V. R. Berghahn and S. Lässig, eds., *Biography between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), esp. 3; in what follows, I have also benefited from V. R. Berghahn, "Structuralism and Biography: Some Concluding Thoughts on the Uncertainties of a Historiographical Genre", *Biography between Structure and Agency*, 234-250.

⁵⁹ Revel, "La biographie comme problème historiographique", 330-331; cf. Revel, "Présentation", 10. J.-L. Fabiani, "La généralisation dans les sciences historiques. Obstacle épistémologique ou ambition légitime?", *Annales HSS*, vol. 62, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 2007): 9-28, still saw no end to the "anarchy", but interpreted current thought on these issues in France as being leery both of the "fugitive satisfaction" of micro-studies and the "illusory authority" of macro-generalizations (10-11).

end of certainties" (to use the title of Prigogine's book in 1997) for many people and in many senses. For Joseph Dan, the failure of historians to anticipate the fall of the Soviet Union had thrown into radical doubt the validity of the – always retrospective – chains of causality that the historical profession constructed. For the American historian Jonathan Steinberg, the same failure implied the complete bankruptcy of the paradigms and models that history had been borrowing from the social sciences since the 1960s.⁶⁰

Yet it would still be wrong to conclude that the increased concern with the individual in history, the tendency to reduce the scale of enquiry that also found expression with *Alltagsgeschichte* in Germany (and in a different form with new historicism in the United States), was the *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s. While biographical and other individualizing approaches earned a new legitimacy, there were countercurrents: *Journal of World History* also began publication in 1990. The years since 2001 have seen the flourishing of world history and its more recent variants, global and transnational: a return of the 'totalizing project' that has been tied to the after-effects of the terrorist attack of 11 September.⁶¹ In Russia, a cultural and political turn inward during the past decade has been accompanied by the marginalization of imported 'Western' theory and – with the year 1991 now regarded as less of a historical watershed – an emphasis on Russian self-sufficiency.⁶² *Casus* and the other periodical and irregular publications, which had begun introducing provocative trends from Western historiography in the 1990s, have remained a minority within the Russian historical field. *Casus* itself did not appear between 2007 and 2011; its ninth issue, entirely devoted to Russian history, was published after this long hiatus in summer 2012. The contents of *Casus* are (at this writing) unavailable through the internet, while paper copies are hard to obtain; *Odysseus* may be read online through a database at subscribing libraries and only *Dialogue with Time*, the more vibrant of the three, is freely accessible to readers in electronic form. Today, it is more under the pervasive influence of (often superficially understood) new social history in English than of Western European theory that publishing firms in Russia are bringing out books on 'the culture of everyday life', assembling under this catchy title work both native and translated, ranging between material culture and the history of emotions.⁶³ History teaching at Russian universities has not been structurally transformed since the end of the Soviet period and, with few educational institutions training their students in new approaches, main-

⁶⁰ "The collapse of the Soviet Union brought down the whole edifice of social science". J. Steinberg, "Cult of Personalities", *Times Higher Education*, 19 July 2012.

⁶¹ To quote A. G. Hopkins, "suddenly, everyone became generalizers again". See his "From Postmodernism to Globalization", opening lecture of the Second European Congress on World and Global History (Dresden, 2008), now in F. Hadler and M. Middell, eds., *World Orders in Historical Perspective* (Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 21–38 (at 35).

⁶² K. Platt, "The Post-Soviet is Over: On Reading the Ruins", *Republics of Letters*, vol. 1, 1 (May 2009), suggests that "historical continuity, rather than rupture, began to dominate the horizon of social experience and historical imagination in Russia" from about 2002.

⁶³ Among the vehicles of such books is a series by the Moscow publisher New Literary Observer (Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, known as NLO), "Kul'tura povsednevnosti" (The Culture of Everyday Life); the title of another book series, also published in Moscow by Molodaia gvardiia, is "Zhivaia istoriia: povsednevaia zhizn' chelovechestva" (Living History: The Everyday Life of Mankind). Cf. M. M. Krom, ed., *Istoriia povsednevnosti: Sbornik nauchnykh rabot* (History of Everyday Life: Collected Papers) (St Petersburg: European University and Aletheia, 2003).

stream historical writing remains, as one study has recently described it, “epistemologically very distinct from its Western counterpart”.⁶⁴

Much of what now goes under the name of world history in Anglophone writing involves broad generalization and synthesis that quickly lose sight of the particular. However, voices challenging generalization in history have not fallen silent since the beginning of this century. Narrative history, with its capacity for accommodating the singular case, enjoys a steady popularity and as the high tide of postmodernism has subsided, the new principle opponent of ‘small history’ would seem to be globalization and the variety of ‘big history’ methods it has generated. A political and cultural impulse for turning back from the general to the personal was put into words by the British writer Zadie Smith, as she argued that “all over the world people have been awakened to the radical nature of the micro, the small and the slow”, and as she called “life on a human scale” one of the “ways of restating our human capacities in a world that frequently sees us only as producers or consumers”.⁶⁵ Recent historical writing has also shown how the ‘micro and macro’ scales may be integrated. In what is already a substantial body of work, close attention to the lives of individuals is joined with a transnational, even ‘global’ perspective.⁶⁶

Far be it therefore from the present author to wish to exclaim, with William Blake, that “To Generalize is to be an Idiot; To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit”.⁶⁷ Some will always lump rather than split, although even those historians more comfortable with studying the larger picture would be unwise to look down at private cases as mere anecdotes, the proper stuff of literature, from which History should keep its distance. The conceptual alternatives to generalization, proposed as part of a search for new relevance by historians in Russia in the 1990s; earlier work by

⁶⁴ D. Kozlov, “Athens and Apocalypse: Writing History in Soviet Russia”, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, general ed. D. Woolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), vol. 5, *Historical Writing since 1945*, eds. A. Schneider and D. Woolf, 396. This said, there are forums for theoretically-aware history in Russian today: among them, the unaffiliated journal of general ‘intellectual’ interest, *Otechestvennye zapiski* (Notes of the Fatherland), published in Moscow between 2001 and 2008, and again since 2012 (see <<http://www.strana-oz.ru>>), or the wide-ranging academic journal of philosophy and culture *Logos*, continuously published in Moscow since 1991 (<<http://www.ruthenia.ru/logos>> and <<http://www.intelros.ru/read-room/logos>>). While the independent journal *New Literary Observer*, main channel for the introduction of literary and cultural theory since its launch in 1992, has not become the consensual main stage for Russian literary studies, through its extensive publishing of books and periodicals NLO has developed a highly influential standing across the Russian humanities and abroad. Its homologue in offering a venue for dialogue between Russian and Western (chiefly, American) historiographical approaches, with main interest in the history of late imperial Russia, has been the journal *Ab Imperio*, now also publishing its own book series. Originally founded by young scholars in Kazan in 2000, it is currently issued in both Russian and English with a strong online presence and an editorial office in the USA. The American journal *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, established in the same year, deserves mention here as it too aims to facilitate, in English, a cross-Atlantic conversation with Russian historical writing.

⁶⁵ Z. Smith, *Why Write?* (Donnini: Santa Maddalena Foundation, 2011), The Gregor von Rezzori Award lecture, delivered at the Writers’ Festival in Florence on 15 June 2011; bilingual Italian-English edition, 43. This goes some way in the direction of R. Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁶⁶ See works discussed in Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?” and, for a fresh example, L. Riall, *Under the Volcano: Revolution in a Sicilian Town* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶⁷ From *Annotations to the Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (ca. 1798-1809), in D. V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, revised ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 641.

the pioneers of microhistory in Italy; the reflections on 'scale' by historians in France and the appeal for admitting 'chaos' into history, made by Joseph Dan in Israel, have given us reasons to beware the kind of generalization which – to conclude with words from the motto in English that *Casus* carries – would leave no room for "the individual", "the unique", "the specific", "the incidental" and "the unexpected".

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