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978-1-107-04028-1 - Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography:

'Futures Past' from Herodotus to Augustine

Jonas Grethlein

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction**'Futures past' – historiography between experience
and teleology***I. Experience and teleology**

The encounter of Croesus with Solon stands prominently at the beginning of Herodotus' *Histories*. Besides featuring a clash of worlds – Lydian king meets Greek sage – the episode helps to set the tone for the narrative, encapsulating Herodotus' take on history *in nuce*. Memorably, Solon hesitates to praise Croesus' version of bliss, pointing out that 'we must look to the conclusion of every matter, and see how it will end' (σκοπέειν δὲ χρὴ παντὸς χρήματος τὴν τελευτὴν κῆ ἀποβήσεται. 1.32.9). It is not difficult to read this wisdom metaleptically as a reference to the *Histories* themselves:¹ a wealth of prolepses betrays Herodotus' interest in very recent and contemporary events, notably the intra-Hellenic conflicts in the second half of the fifth century,² and yet his narrative ends with the year 479 BCE. A gap of two generations thus allows Herodotus to acquiesce to the maxim of the *Histories*' Solon and consider historical events from their end.

A very different view of how to narrate the past comes to the fore in an ancient comment on Herodotus' most prominent successor. In his treatise *On the Glory of the Athenians*, Plutarch turns to Thucydides to illustrate Simonides' dictum that poetry is a speaking painting (*De glor. Ath.* 347a):

Thucydides is always striving for this vividness in his writing, since it is his desire to make the reader a spectator, as it were, and to instil into readers the emotions of amazement and consternation felt by eyewitnesses.

ὁ γοῦν Θουκυδίδης αἰεὶ τῷ λόγῳ πρὸς ταύτην ἀμιλλᾶται τὴν ἐνάργειαν, οἷον θεατὴν ποιῆσαι τὸν ἀκροατὴν καὶ τὰ γινόμενα περὶ

¹ See also Artabanus in 7.51.3; cf. Grethlein 2009b: 214.

² This has been much commented on in scholarship, see, e.g., Fornara 1971b; Stadter 1992; Moles 1996.

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τοὺς ὁρῶντας ἐκπληκτικὰ καὶ ταρακτικὰ πάθη τοῖς ἀναγινώσκουσιν
ἐνεργάσασθαι λιχνευόμενος.³

The visual quality of Thucydides' narrative lets the reader view the fighting at Pylos and the battle in the harbour of Syracuse as if they were just unfolding.

Solon's metaleptic comment on the *Histories* and Plutarch's reading of Thucydides describe two poles between which narratives of the past oscillate: teleology and experience. The historian can capitalize on the advantage of hindsight or try to render the past as it was experienced by the historical agents. It is the project of this book to explore this tension in ancient historical narrative. In this introductory chapter, I will chart its theoretical implications and thereby provide the framework for my readings as well as elucidating their relevance for the theory of history. After elaborating on teleology and experience in the remainder of this section, I will use Danto's concept of 'narrative sentences' as a stepping stone to conceptualize the tension between them that I label 'futures past' (II). I shall then turn to narrative and situate my approach in a current debate among theoreticians of history (III). In a final step, I will sum up the goals of *Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography* and give a synopsis of its argument (IV).

In the context of my argument, *telos* does not signify the historians' ulterior motives, e.g. to entertain or educate their readers, but the vantage point from which a course of events is told. Posteriority endows the historian with a superior stance the importance of which is nicely illustrated by an episode from Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*. The novel's hero, Fabrice del Dongo, desperately trying to join Napoleon's troops despite his young age and poor knowledge of French, witnesses the battle of Waterloo. Donned in the uniform of a French hussar, he wanders right onto the battlefield, joins the troops of Marshal Ney and is wounded in the leg. Although Fabrice is as present and as close as possible, the narrative focalized through his eyes tells us very little about the battle. This is not only due to Fabrice's imbecile character and his spatially limited vantage point, but also bespeaks the superiority which retrospect bestows on historians. Notably a couple of weeks later, after recovering from his injury, Fabrice tries to learn about the battle from journal articles and even wonders: 'What he had seen, was it a battle, and second, was this battle Waterloo?'⁴

³ See also Plut. *Nic.* 1.1; 1.5. On Plutarch's manifold playful engagements with Thucydides, see Pelling 1992.

⁴ Stendhal 2007: 87: 'Ce qu'il avait vu, était-ce une bataille, et en seconde lieu, cette bataille était-elle Waterloo?' On the discrepancy between the experience of a battle and later reports, see Tolstoy 2004

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The temporal distance that at first sight appears as an impediment to the historians' work is, besides the access to multiple perspectives, one of their chief assets. Hindsight allows historians to evaluate events in the light of later events and make out links that are still invisible to the historical agents. The Austrian novelist von Doderer puts it beautifully in the words of the narrator of his *Die Dämonen*: 'Out of that past, what belongs together in truth (often without our knowing) gradually grows together; and related entities shake hands and bridge the gap of time even if they were widely separated from each other in life, in different years, at different places, without an accessible link between their environments.'⁵ Less poetic, but conveying more or less the same idea is a fragment from the second-century BCE annalist Fannius: 'When we have learned our lessons in life, then much that seems good at its time, turns out to be bad and many things are very different from what they seemed to be . . .' (*cum in vita agenda didicimus, multa, quae inpraesentiarum bona videntur, post <mala> inventa et multa amplius alius modi atque ante visa essent* . . . fr. 1 Peter). It is crucial for historians to go beyond the perspective of their characters and view the past from the *telos* of events still anterior to them.⁶ Even David Carr, one of the most eloquent advocates of the role of experience in historiography, affirms this when he elaborates on the steps of historical reconstruction: in a first step, historians retrieve the events as experienced by the historical agents, they then compare the experiences of various characters and finally incorporate them in a new story from their own elevated point of view.⁷

At the same time, historians and philosophers have not tired of warning against the sway of teleology and have instead advanced a focus on the experiences of historical agents. To start with, two scholars who are not often mentioned in the same sentence may illustrate the reservations of historians against 'the enormous condescension of posteriority':⁸ in his diatribe against the 'whig interpretation of history', Herbert Butterfield attacks liberal historians who fail to do justice to the past by not seeing

in the second epilogue to *War and Peace* (1220–1); the battle narratives of this novel seem strongly influenced by Stendhal.

⁵ von Doderer 1956: I: 16: 'Aus jenem Vergangenen aber schwankt wie aus Nebeln zusammen, was aus Wahrheit zusammen gehört, wir wußten's oft kaum, aber jetzt reicht das verwandte Gebild dem verwandten die Hand und sie schlagen eine Brücke durch die Zeit, mögen sie auch sonst im Leben ganz weit auseinander gestanden haben, in verschiedenen Jahren, an verschiedenen Orten, zwischen denen eine recht eigentlich gangbare Verbindung der Umstände fehlt.' See also the impressive description of the view from the window that can be read as a metaphor for the historian's activity (20–1).

⁶ The advantage of hindsight is felt with particular force in the case of autobiography, cf. Freeman 1993: 108–9.

⁷ Carr 2006: 135. ⁸ Thompson 1966: 12.

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it in its own right, but 'produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present'.⁹ With a very different political agenda in mind, E. P. Thompson, the doyen of British neo-Marxist history, sets out to record the experiences of the English working class.¹⁰

From a more theoretical point of view, Raymond Aron had already observed in 1938: 'Retrospect creates an illusion of fatality which contradicts the contemporaneous impression of contingency.'¹¹ He argues that causal analysis by historians should serve less to trace the great lines of history than to re-establish the uncertainty of the future for those who lived in the past.¹² More than half a century later (and without taking note of Aron), M. A. Bernstein chooses a particularly sensitive subject for historical representation to challenge the tendency towards teleological constructions in historiography and objects that the Shoah is envisaged as unimaginable and inevitable at the same time.¹³ This perspective fails in particular to do justice to the experiences of the Jewish population before the Nazis' destructive machinery started up. From yet another angle, Lucian Hölscher notes that historical reconstructions neglect past views of the future and suggests an 'archaeology' which moves through the layers of earlier historical reconstructions to the events themselves and envisages them in the horizon of their own time.¹⁴

Teleology and experience are obviously at loggerheads: the more historians cash in on hindsight, the further they move away from the perspective of the historical agents. Trying to write history as it was experienced, on the other hand, requires renouncing the superior stance of retrospect. That said, teleology and experience are not without links. As emphasized by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*, human life is directed towards the future. We anticipate the future with a wide variety of feelings ranging from fear to hope. This variety notwithstanding, the anticipation of the future by historical agents prefigures the teleologies of historians. Needless to say, the goals pursued by humans are not necessarily identical with the telē from which their lives are later told, but nonetheless embed in the world of experience a structure that is homologous to the teleologies of historical narratives.¹⁵

⁹ Butterfield 1931: 12. ¹⁰ Thompson 1966.

¹¹ Aron 1938: 181: 'La retrospection crée une illusion de fatalité qui contredit l'impression contemporaine de contingence.'

¹² Aron 1938: 182. ¹³ Bernstein 1994. ¹⁴ Hölscher 2003: 52.

¹⁵ This homology provides an answer to Bernstein's question as to why to privilege the end of something (1994: 29). This is not an arbitrary imposition by historians as he insinuates, but corresponds to the structure of human action itself.

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It seems that the experiential quality of historical narrative is deeply rooted in our interest in the past. Some branches of current historiography may revel in numbers, statistics and maps, but, together with the work of many professional historians, the flourishing industry of the historical novel bespeaks a desire to know what it felt like to lie face to face with Cleopatra, to join a crusade or to be on board the Mayflower. Gumbrecht takes this aspect further when he argues that our interest in the past originates in the desire to transgress the limits of our *Lebenswelt*. Applied to time, this means: 'We want to know the worlds that existed before we were born, and experience them directly.'¹⁶ Linked to the wish to feel with past generations is the urge to experience them oneself in some way. Another aspect of experiential historiography is that it lends itself to recovering the possibility of agency in the flow of history. While teleology often tends to trace lines beyond the grasp of historical protagonists, the focus on experiences suits well a view of history as the product of individual agency.¹⁷

Besides being fostered by the retrospect with which we view the past, teleology appears to answer another deep-seated desire. While we are exposed to the vagaries of the future in our lives, the past offers a closed realm. Hermeneutics reminds us that there is no definitive narrative of the past, that different angles are possible and that the further processing of time will continue to open new ones,¹⁸ but, within the retrospect of a single narrative, all the openness and insecurity that make life just as troublesome as exciting can be banned. The look back permits us to master the contingencies to which we are subject in life, to replace vulnerability with sovereignty. Teleology can thus serve as a means of coping with temporality.

Following the pull to be in touch with the past as well as the desire to overcome the vagaries of time, experience and teleology arguably constitute the core of our interest in the past. Beginning with Herodotus, historians have of course prided themselves on their accuracy and methodological rigour,

¹⁶ Gumbrecht 1997: 419.

¹⁷ It ought to be emphasized that these are only tendencies: If the *telos* is identical with an agent's goal, a teleological account can also emphasize the role of agency, whilst an experiential account can also highlight failures of historical agents.

¹⁸ In the words of a character of *Die Dämonen*, the historian Neuberg (109): 'Jedesmal aber muß die ganze Vergangenheit neu geordnet und gesichtet werden, da ja jedesmal ihr Schwerpunkt, nach welchem sich alles richten muß, anderswohin verschoben ist: nämlich in eine andere Gegenwart und das heißt aber zugleich auch in einen anderen jetzt tiefinnerlich verwandten und höchst gegenwärtigen Teil der Vergangenheit.' ('Yet, every time the entire past has to be ordered and envisioned anew, because every time its centre of gravity, to which all things tend, shifts to another place, namely to another present and that means simultaneously to another point in the past that is deeply related and truly present.')

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thereby setting their reconstructions apart from non-scholarly views.¹⁹ And yet, historiography is rooted in our everyday interest in the past.²⁰ While the political aspects of ancient historiography have received much attention, an exploration of the tension between experience and teleology lets us elucidate a more existential aspect and view historiography as a means of coming to grips with temporality.

II. From 'narrative sentences' to 'futures past'

Arthur Danto's idea of 'narrative sentences' can help us conceptualize the tension between teleology and experience that underlies historiography. In his analytical philosophy of history, Danto observes that historians are fond of a particular type of sentence: 'Narrative sentences refer to at least two time-separated events, and describe the earlier event.'²¹ The statement 'The Thirty Years' War began in 1618',²² for example, is about an event in 1618 that is seen against the horizon of a later event, the year 1648. Danto limits his analysis to single sentences, but I contend that the structure of 'narrative sentences' also defines narratives of the past as a whole: the retrospect makes historians view the past in the light of subsequent events. The vantage point historians choose influences the selection of the material as well as its arrangement and thereby gives historical narratives their character. The later event against which the earlier event is described in Danto's narrative sentences recurs *mutatis mutandis* as the *telos* in a historiographic work.

This *telos* is distinct from, albeit dependent on, the horizon of the historians' present; the historians' reconstruction ought therefore not to be mixed up with Gadamer's notion of 'Horizontverschmelzung'.²³ The fusion of our horizon with the horizon of our object that is part of any act of understanding also applies to historians and explains why every age has to narrate the past anew. It is not necessary that the present of the historians forms the *telos* of the events they narrate. While the historians' understanding of their subjects is influenced by the horizon of their present, the *telos* of their narratives can also be in the past,²⁴ often the endpoint or

¹⁹ Cf. Grethlein 2010a and 2011b for a new assessment of the rise of Greek historiography in the tension between innovation and continuity with other genres.

²⁰ For this take on history which is indebted to the phenomenological tradition, see the introductions in Grethlein 2006a and 2010a.

²¹ Danto 1985: 159. ²² Cf. Danto 1985: 152.

²³ See especially Gadamer 1986: 275–83. Habermas blurs the distinction when he embeds a discussion of Danto's 'narrative sentence' in his review of *Wahrheit und Methode* (1977: 342–51).

²⁴ To be precise, the *telos* necessarily belongs to the past as the act of retrospective writing is always posterior to the events covered.

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climax of their narratives, for example the final victory in a war monograph or the death of the hero in a biography. While belonging to the general hermeneutics of understanding, the temporal poetics of historical writing are not identical with them.

Certain events such as military victory and death suggest themselves as *telos*, but the vantage point from which specific historic events are told is as undetermined as it is crucial for their understanding: a history of Germany in the 1920s, for instance, can be told from the vantage point of the economic crisis casting its shadow in 1929 or from the vantage point of the Shoah, to mention just two possibilities. While in the first case Adolf Hitler and his political agitation would barely be mentioned, the Beer Hall Putsch and *Mein Kampf* would figure prominently in the second.

The Peloponnesian War furnishes an ancient example of the possibility of various *telē* and their impact on how we understand the past: Thucydides' narrative, as we have it, breaks off in mid-sentence, but passages such as the evaluation of Pericles in 2.65 and the second proem in 5.26 make it clear that the defeat of Athens in 404 BCE is the *telos* of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Thucydides' picture of the Peloponnesian War is so powerful that we have come to take it for granted, but other endpoints, conditioning rather different storylines, are thinkable, too. Dionysius, for example, takes issue, among other aspects, with the ending of Thucydides' account. While he levels his critique at the point where *The History of the Peloponnesian War* breaks off, obviously assuming that it is the intended endpoint, his suggestion of an alternative *telos* nonetheless illustrates an interpretation of the Peloponnesian War that is at odds with the one that we glean from the fragment of *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (Pomp. 3.10, 771 Usener-Radermacher):

It would have been better, after going through all the events, to end his history with a climax, and one that was most remarkable and especially gratifying to his audience, the return of the exiles from Phyle, which marked the beginning of the city's recovery of freedom.

κρεῖττον δὲ ἦν διεξελθόντα πάντα τελευτὴν ποιήσασθαι τῆς ἱστορίας τὴν θαυμασιωτάτην καὶ μάλιστα τοῖς ἀκούουσι κεχαρισμένην, τὴν καθόδον τῶν φυγάδων τῶν ἀπὸ Φυλῆς ἀφ' ὧν ἡ πόλις ἀρξαμένη τὴν ἐλευθερίαν ἀνεκομίσατο.

Whereas the *telos* of Thucydides' account creates a sombre picture of Athenian history, the vantage point favoured by Dionysius would have it

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end on an up-beat note.²⁵ Instead of being the story of a mighty polis brought down by a corrupt political system, the Peloponnesian War would appear as the pertinacity of the Athenian democracy through a host of hardships and trials.

The very notion of a single Peloponnesian War lasting from 431–404 BCE is far from being the only way of viewing the history of this time, as several texts from the fourth century reveal: Andocides and Aeschines consider the hostilities in 431–421, 419/418 and 415–404 BCE as distinct wars just as Socrates in Plato's *Menexenus* distinguishes between the battles of Tanagra and Oenophyta, the Ten Years' War and a 'third war', arguably covering 415–404 BCE.²⁶ Needless to say, envisaged against the background of the Nicias Peace, the first years of the Peloponnesian War read very differently from Thucydides who takes the break-down of Athens in 404 BCE as his vantage point.

The choice of a vantage point is the fulcrum on which historians balance experience against teleology in their narratives. Those who downplay hindsight and align their perspectives with the historical agents will foreground contemporary experience. Capitalizing on retrospect, on the other hand, and choosing vantage points remote from the agents leads to strong teleologies. I suggest calling the underlying temporal dynamics 'futures past'.²⁷ Besides entwining retrospect with prospect, the term captures the asymmetry between characters and historians – what is still future for the former, is already past for the latter – and signifies the point that regulates the balance between experience and teleology: the stronger the future in a given narrative's 'futures past', the stronger its focus on experience; the more the 'futures past' is treated as past, on the other hand, the more prominent becomes its teleology.

Most historiographic works feature elements of both experience and teleology. Accounts that fully ignore the perspective of the agents tend to be unsatisfying, as shown in Quintilian's comparison of a lapidary statement that a city was conquered, with a colourful account including the feelings of the conquered: '... to state the whole is less than to state all the parts'. (... *minus est tamen totum dicere quam omnia*. *Inst.* 8.3.69.) On the other hand, it is hard, if not impossible, to escape hindsight entirely given that

²⁵ Cf. Marincola 2005: 305; Fromentin 2008: 61.

²⁶ Andoc. 3.3–9; 29–31; Aeschin. 2.173–6; Pl. *Menex.* 242e–3b. Cf. de Ste. Croix 1972: 294–5.

²⁷ My use of 'futures past' is distinct from Koselleck's. His 1979 book bears the main title *Vergangene Zukunft* that is rendered as *Futures Past* in the title and as 'former future(s)' in the text of the English translation (cf. the translator's note in Koselleck 1985: xi n. 13). While Koselleck is interested in the future as seen in the past, an aspect that proves fundamental for his take on *Neuzeit*, I focus on the temporal asymmetry of agents and historians in the sense outlined above.

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our view of the past is retrospective. It seems that the combination of both is crucial to our engagement with the past.²⁸ The blessing of hindsight is felt only against the background of the agents' experience which in turn demands retrospect to be understood. Historical explanation requires both: in order to explain a course of events we need to know both where they are headed and how this end was reached.²⁹ While most historical narratives thus contain both experience and teleology, they weight and express them differently, as my readings of various ancient works will illustrate.

III. Narrative and experience

After elaborating on the concept of 'futures past' as defining the asymmetry between agents and historians, it is time to turn to narrative and consider its capacity to express teleology and experience. The power to express hindsight in narrative needs no further argumentation, as its teleological leanings are well known. The posteriority of the act of narrating comes to the fore in the privileging of the past tense in narrative.³⁰ Thomas Mann's narrator in *Joseph und seine Brüder* can therefore ask in his *Höllenfahrt* that explores the depth of the fountain of history: 'Is not the past the element of the narrator and his life-breath, familiar to him as temporal mode and appropriate as water is to fish?'³¹

The case for narrative and experience has been made by Monika Fludernik, who in *Natural Narratology* sets out to define 'narrativity' as mediated 'experientiality', that is 'the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience'.³² Introspection is the most obvious means of expressing the experiences of characters in narrative; accordingly the modernist novel

²⁸ I am therefore hesitant to follow Strasburger in his polarization triggered by a reflection on Polybius' critique of Phylarchus (1966: 83): 'Wird der Mensch über Gang und Wesen der Geschichte sachgerechter belehrt durch den Verstand oder das Gefühl, durch das Sich-Erheben zu nüchterner Betrachtung der pragmatischen Zusammenhänge von hoher Warte aus oder durch den Versuch, die Realität, welche Geschichte für die von ihr handelnd und leidend Betroffenen hatte, in voller Intensität nachzuerleben?!' ('Does one learn more about the course and essence of history from intellect or feeling, from rising to sober consideration of pragmatic links from high above, or from the attempt to re-experience with full intensity the reality that history had for those who were affected by it in acting and suffering?') With admirable lucidity, Strasburger identifies here the tension between experience and teleology as a central question, but he does not recognize their intricate interaction.

²⁹ I owe this important point to Chris Pelling.

³⁰ On the importance of retrospect for narrative, see, e.g., Abbott 2005; on the past tense as expressing 'Sinnabgeschlossenheit', see Wolf 2002: 49. On teleology in narrative, see also Ajouri 2009.

³¹ Mann 1960: I: 53: 'Ist nicht das Vergangene Element und Lebensluft des Erzählers, ihm als Zeitfall vertraut und gemäß wie dem Fisch das Wasser?'

³² Fludernik 1996: 12. However, Fludernik denies the presence of experientiality in historiography, a position that I will challenge in the Epilogue.

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with its focus on processes of consciousness is a prime example of Fludernik's definition of 'narrativity'. In this section, I would like to go beyond Fludernik's analysis and demonstrate why narrative lends itself to the representation of experience. Narrative, I hope to show, permits us not only to learn about past experiences, but also, within certain boundaries, to re-experience them. My argument takes up the recent interest of theoreticians in the experience of the past while challenging their tendency to pit it against narrative. Let me first discuss two examples of this trend in more detail to chart the contribution that the angle of 'futures past' can make to the current debate.³³ I will then elaborate on narrative re-experience, briefly touch upon the special case of historiography and finally throw my approach into relief through a comparison with the ancient concept of *enargeia*.

'The New Romanticists'

The recent turn from narrative to experience in the theory of history is nicely illustrated by the works of Frank Ankersmit. After following Hayden White's lead and elaborating on a rhetorical theory of history,³⁴ Ankersmit grew more and more interested in how we experience the past. In *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005), Ankersmit challenges the linguistic transcendentalism that he finds not only in tropology, but also in hermeneutics, semiotics, and deconstruction. Experience, Ankersmit argues, precedes language and is incommensurate with narrative.³⁵ Historians, too, experience the past before they represent it. The experience of the past takes place in the tension between 'discovery' and 'recovery'. The 'loss' of the past is countered by 'love', the desire for it: 'The sublimity of historical experience originates from the paradoxical union of the feelings of loss and love, that is, of the combination of pain and pleasure in how we relate to the past.'³⁶ Ankersmit stresses that his new approach is not meant to recant his earlier works, but sheds light on how historians access the past before they set out to represent it. Nonetheless, the conceptualization of historical experience necessitates a turn from postmodern theory with its focus on linguistic representation to a 'New Romanticism' of experience, especially feeling.

A good deal of Romanticism has also been discerned in Gumbrecht's reflections on history.³⁷ I have already referred to his observation that the desire to transgress the limits of our everyday world brings with it a

³³ For a lengthier version of the following argument, see Grethlein 2010b.

³⁴ Ankersmit 1994: 2001. ³⁵ Cf. Ankersmit 2005: 172–3. ³⁶ Cf. Ankersmit 2005: 9.

³⁷ Cf. Kramer 2009: 85–97.