

Postscript

Turning History Upside Down

It is the retrospective view that identifies the most formative moments of the past, the individuals, ideas, movements and events. Different moments, therefore, will attract attention as the point from which the viewer looks back itself moves.

Judith Lieu 2015¹

Over the past years, I have intensely reflected upon what has been termed ‘history of reception’, and also looked into the more recent developments in New Historicism, New Philology, the Material, Linguistic and Cultural Turns and their critical developments in Cultural Transfer and Entangled History, to name the more recent labels of historiographical discourses or paradigmata.² Yet, one paradox has concerned me more and more, even though it has already been highlighted by Kierkegaard, that ‘life must be understood backwards, but . . . it must be lived forwards’.³ As with life it is with writing any form of history, hence also that of Early Christianity.

The writing of history is done in retrospection,⁴ in recollection and making sense of the past by reflection, by looking backwards;⁵ and it is

¹ (Lieu 2015: 1).

² For a survey of the more recent historiographical discourses, see (Fulbrook 2002; Green 2005; Iggers 1984, 2005). For those discourses that are particularly relevant for the writing of early Christian history, see (Clark 2004; Kinzig 2004). On the nature of the term ‘discourse’, which seems ‘like none other to express intellectual plurality and tolerance’, see (Schöttler 2018b: 123). The alternative term ‘paradigma’ is associated with Thomas S. Kuhn; see (Kuhn and Hacking 2012).

³ (Kierkegaard and Auden 1999: 3).

⁴ The term ‘retrospection’ is common in contemporary narratology; see (Schenk 2013: 9–10). See also (Neumann and Nünning 2008: 159–62; Ryan 2009: 91–3).

⁵ ‘Making sense is of course an activity in the present; and it is an active practice, not a matter of passive reception and reflection of what has gone before’; see (Fulbrook 2002:

written and read anachronologically by us authors and readers going backwards, although the outcomes of what we write and read are chronological stories. Indeed, universally, history, including that of Early Christianity, is written in a chronological way. Having jumped into the past to reflect upon history, we skip the time gap, and start walking alongside our protagonists. While I have written this type of Early Christian history myself for many years, I wonder, whether I had been aware of all the implications of such history writing. An anonymous reader of an earlier draft of this introductory ‘postscript’ critically remarked: ‘I don’t think the idea of retrospection or that we necessarily do history in and about the present is a new one.’ He is right, as indicated with Kierkegaard, that retrospection is not a novelty, but he is not critical enough, thinking that it is just about doing ‘history in and about the present’, as will be shown.

As with life, it is with the time relation to any material object. Such time is directed and can never be reversed; no thing that one has ever seen has rolled backwards.⁶ Likewise, language, with its in-built grammar, always moves forwards, builds sentence on sentence, argument on argument, hence seems to be progressive and work creatively. In contrast, however, and it is a strange phenomenon, a sheer enigma,⁷ our brain recognition works backwards and in this sense seems to be conservative. Knowledge, including historical knowledge, as a combination of language and recognition, therefore, seems a mixed bag. When people ‘are forward-looking’, when they make ‘plans for the future’ and base their actions on a ‘cognitive map’ that is linked to future outcomes, they do this ‘experience based’⁸ and are at least ‘in part *historically*’ conditioned.⁹ It is a conditioning that is derived ‘from the actor’s mental model of the

195). Part II of her book carries the title: ‘Investigations: Routes from the present to the past’ (ibid.: 51–140). Nevertheless, she does not engage in retrospection, but sees doing history ‘as a primarily puzzle-solving’ endeavour (ibid.: 53).

⁶ ‘Le temps des objets visibles a une direction et ne revient jamais en arrière; tous les êtres et toutes les choses à la seule exception des corps célestes avancent sous no yeux vers la désintégration et nul n’en a vu qui aurait rebroussé chemin’ (Pomian 1984). Ibid. (342–7) the discussion on theoretical physics about the question of the irreversibility of time.

⁷ See on the ‘enigma’ of the past, an expression by Paul Ricoeur: (Ricoeur 1985: 141; 1988: 77). On this see (Vandeveldt 2016: 123).

⁸ (Gavetti 2000: 113).

⁹ (Straub 2005: 44–5). I owe a great deal to my co-fellow of the Max-Weber-Center, Erfurt, Germany.

world' they know, or think they know.¹⁰ Hence, the imaginary future is but an extrapolation of our imagined past and a projection from 'an *anticipation* of where the course of world events is going overall'.¹¹ The future tense in talking or writing about the future, however, leads one to believe that what one is going to do or to experience lies 'ahead' of us and is not part of us yet. Likewise, when we turn around and look at the journeys we and our foremothers and forefathers have experienced, we do so by projecting our present imaginations onto these, consciously or unconsciously filtering those through our internal hopes for the future, but when it comes to putting the past into words, grammar – at least that of most non-Semitic languages – moves events and people to a great distance from us.

The two principal directions of historiography, that of progress and the other of retrospection, have been seen as a principle choice by Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), the chronological one 'going from the past into the present' and the ana-chronological one 'going from the present into the past'.¹² And, perhaps, one could venture that it does not make any difference which of the two directions one chooses when writing history. Is it simply a matter of perspective that has no impact on the results? Is the quoted reviewer not right that for many years already people have thought about the importance of the present for any form of history writing? Even if one writes, as usually done, from the past into the present, historians can highlight the gap between then and now and the strangeness, even uniqueness and often incomprehensibilities linked to the distant past.¹³

Granted that the writing of history (ιστορία) in both directions is a search, an experience and a journey of discovery,¹⁴ the second option to write history from the present into the past, however, demands, as I would like to show, a radicalised openness towards what is utterly other.¹⁵ If, as proposed in this study, we approach history moving slowly backwards from now towards the past, we need to take into account more seriously our present experience.¹⁶ And yet, it is not even clear whether we can do so as, by deploying the same direction into which we think, we work explicitly against our language capability. How can

¹⁰ (Gavetti 2000: 113). ¹¹ (Guignon 2005: 398).

¹² (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999: 862). On Benjamin's *Arcades Project* see (Chiesa 2016: 17–61).

¹³ (Chin 2017: 480). ¹⁴ See (Koselleck and Gadamer 2000: 20, 27–77).

¹⁵ (Ricoeur 1974: 53). ¹⁶ (Koselleck and Gadamer 2000: 20).

one write history in an ana-chronological way, just as the miner is going down the vertical tunnel in a corf? If language is the obstacle, we may need to think in terms of ana-chronological layers of history within which we have to follow the language constraints and develop chronological stories at each such layer. The English language can only partially imitate the German semantic idea that ‘Geschichte’ should be done in ‘(Ge) Schichten’, ‘history be done in stories’.

As this study here is focusing on *Writing the History of Early Christianity* I will do in praxis what I am going to develop elsewhere in a detailed explanation of what philosophically and historically is entailed in retrospection.¹⁷ For those readers who are less interested in methodology, and instead would like to see the praxis of it, I suggest to skip Chapter 1 and start straight with Chapter 2 and read the four case studies that develop the retrospective journey. That Chapter 1 precedes the case studies does not mean that those case studies are only the results of a theory, but, as will be seen, the theory itself is born out of writing history. Nevertheless, the case studies will also show that the way, these cases are developed differ from the way I would have approached the topics without having developed a retrospective view.¹⁸ For you who are keen on the theoretical background, you may read Chapter 1 as a taster for what will be further elaborated elsewhere, and as an explanation why in this book the world clock ticks backwards, and I am trying to turn history upside down.

¹⁷ See my forthcoming study *Retrospektion*.

¹⁸ Thus, there is no conundrum of whether theory or praxis comes first. See on this problem with regards to Johann Gustav Droysen’s relation of theory and praxis (Muhlack 2004: 20–5).