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Discussions of Books

Laura Carnevale, Roberto Alciati, *Discussion of the Book* of Markus Vinzent, *Writing the* *History of Early Christianity. From* *Reception to Retrospection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)

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AN UNCONVENTIONAL BOOK AND ITS CONTENTS

When I started thinking about historiographical anachronism and chronology, my colleagues asked me whether this difference actually mattered. And while at first I was unsure, it seems to me that the question of where to begin with history has a huge bearing on its outcome. If I cannot start writing history from the anywhere other than now, here, from the very moment that I am typing these characters, words, sentences into my laptop, then is what I am writing and reading history, herstory, mystory, yourstory?¹

This quotation seems to me an appropriate starting point for the following discussion, inasmuch it reveals the Author's feelings of hesitation before writing this book—which have been probably initially shared by many of his readers. Furthermore, the quotation also discloses Vinzent's goal: he aims at providing a guide to understanding the early Christians, looking not for institutions, but for individual agents and their lived experience.² As a side effect of such purpose, followed across four intense

¹ M. Vinzent, *Writing the History of Early Christianity. From Reception to Retrospection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 17.

² See also *ibidem*, 54. A similar option, motivated by analogous reasons, has been already endorsed in past years by scholars who focused their investigation on the so called lived/individual/everyday religion. And it is not by chance that most of them also used the concrete noun (Christians), choosing it over the abstract one (Christianity), as often as they could: e.g., C. Carletti, *Epigrafia dei cristiani in Occidente. Ideologia e prassi* (Edipuglia: Bari, 2008). The well-known investigations on Religious Individualization and on Lived Ancient Religion carried

of other scholars and ready to be criticized,⁵³ but also as a human being, who faces doubts and uncertainties in his life and his work, loves his children and is loved by them,⁵⁴ enjoys philosophy, travelling, and movies, especially the ones he uses to better explain the retrospective methodology: *Titanic* (with his retrospective beginning) by James Cameron and *Before The Rain*, by Milcho Manchevski.⁵⁵

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RETROSPECTIONS FOR A NEW PATRISTICS

Writing the History of Early Christianity is a quite generic title for a book, but probably the best way to captivate potential readers looking for a general history of the subject. In fact, what Markus Vinzent is offering in his last book is, exactly, a sample of a general history of Christianity in antiquity, according to a specific approach: retrospection. In this respect, the title actually assumes that, until now, a proper history of early Christianity has never been written. The reason for this absence is “hidden” in the subtitle: *From Reception to Retrospection*. The expression can be rephrased in this way: reception history (just like postmodernism) has missed its target, so it is necessary to change the approach to the documents currently at the disposal of historians, and especially in the case of those scholars working on religion. The consequences of embarking on such a radical change are quite evident at the end of the reading. However, in this book Vinzent also wanted to focus on the new method, with a much more theoretical and programmatic aim. This effort may be interpreted as part of a broader project, which we could tentatively call a new Patristics, grounded in the hermeneutical movement suggested by the subtitle.

Over the last ten years, Markus Vinzent has repeatedly insisted on the urgency of a radical change in historical research. The first proposal dates back to 2009, when he published an article entitled “*Re-modernity*”: *Overcoming the Divide of Denominations, Religions and Ideolog-*

⁵³ “I am all too aware of the preliminary nature of both the kind of revisionist historiography I have tested out here, and the many observations in the various chapters in which I have only been able to scratch the surfaces” (*ibidem*, 466).

⁵⁴ “Thanks to [...] my two children, who pretend not to understand anything I do, but who simply love me for doing what I love” (Vinzent, *Writing the History*).

⁵⁵ These movies are the subject of a series of remarks in the light of Retrospection: see *ibidem*, 30–32 and 467–68.

ical Categories.⁵⁶ The term “re-modernity,” which also appears in the title of a paragraph in the book we are discussing here, would indicate a scholarly approach bearing “the marks of a post-postmodern or rather re-modern philosophy.”⁵⁷ Here Vinzent, presenting himself as a scholar of religious studies, invites his colleagues to take into consideration the fact that this research field needs a radical change:

Re-modernity [...] advocates that religious studies can no longer be done without appreciating the inter-connectedness of the economic, the political, environmental as well as the ritual, ethnic, linguistic and reflexive levels of human existence.⁵⁸

This approach was reiterated in 2011 and could be simplified with a motto: “‘Anything goes’ could not simply go on forever.”⁵⁹ Retrospection in scholarly research implies a different idea of modernity, that is one able to go over and against postmodernity, that is “re-modernity.” A re-modern approach “is not a recipe book for likes and dislikes, [...] but an austere process of critical self-reflection and scepticism towards modern and postmodern concepts.”⁶⁰

Exactly in the same years Vinzent was writing these essays, in the humanities—and particularly in religious studies—an increasing number of scholars began to distance themselves, slowly but progressively, from postmodernism, trying to show how this category often served only as a kind of simple oppositional object. Vinzent is surely well aware of this literature, but seems to have chosen an oblique way of dealing with postmodernism’s critics. It is as if he had decided not to deal with the issue head-on, thus avoiding direct confrontation. In fact, he looks past, leaving the difficulties of postmodernism behind. In other words, Vinzent seems to mean the context in which he was trained needs urgent reform.

In this regard—and the relevance of the subtitle needs to be stressed once again—Vinzent’s book is *not* exactly about early Christianity, *but* about a new methodology here applied, for the first time, to early Christianity, or more precisely to Patristics, a research field that the author rightly considers one of the most conservative in religious studies. In her detailed review of Vinzent’s book, Laura Carnevale was able to summarise clearly the contents of the book; I cannot add anything of relevance to that. Therefore, I will focus on the more theoretical part of

⁵⁶ Markus Vinzent, “‘Re-modernity’: Overcoming the Divide of Denominations, Religions and Ideological Categories,” in *Wege und Welten der Religionen: Forschungen und Vermittlungen* (ed. J. Court and M. Klöcker; Frankfurt a.M.: Otto Lembeck, 2009), 635-45.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 635.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 637.

⁵⁹ Markus Vinzent, “Re-modernities: or the volcanic landscape of religion,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 32 (2011): 143-60, here 148.

⁶⁰ Vinzent, “Re-modernities,” 157-58.

the volume, trying to show how this new methodology could modify our perceptions of early Christianity.

I. AGAINST AND TOWARDS SCHOLARSHIP

When I was waiting for the postal delivery of *Writing the History of Early Christianity*, I came across another recent publication: *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) written by Edward Slingerland, a scholar of Asian Studies. The general assumption Slingerland is criticising in his book is the claim according to which there is really something fundamentally different about early Chinese conceptions of nature. As he accurately shows in the first chapter, the majority of scholars belonging to this field agree on the “otherness” of Chinese culture about mind: the predominant idea is that the early Chinese were totally holistic, seeing no qualitative difference between mind and body. Slingerland, instead, believes that new digital humanities methods, along with basic knowledge about human cognition, make this position simply untenable. Moreover, Slingerland maintains that a large number of publications, and the consequent *opinio communis*, according to which Chinese (and oriental in general) culture has always been profoundly different from the Graeco-Roman one, are wrong. Or, to put this another way,

strong linguistic or cultural constructivism is conceptually incoherent, theoretically impossible, and empirically false. [...] The relative importance of innate, or “maturationally natural,” cognitive tendencies versus cultural training, [...] are all the subjects of current debate. What is, at this point, beyond dispute for scholars working outside the cloistered environment of core humanistic departments is that extreme cultural constructivism is a non starter.⁶¹

The problem is not only orientalism, and its cognate eurocentrism, but stereotypes caused by interpretive traps and missteps. The result, Slingerland says, is a hermeneutical excess. Slingerland makes a list of these traps in Chinese studies and says why they may happen. He mentions philosophical and methodological evidences, which focus on common rhetorical moves in reasoning. These moves “cause scholars to overshoot reasonable interpretations of textual and archaeological evidence and launch themselves, and their unwary readers, down the slippery slope to strong mind-body holism.”⁶² The attack on the conservatism of the humanities is explicit. Unfortunately though, Slingerland

⁶¹ Edward Slingerland, *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 312.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 220.

is saying almost nothing about *how* scholars, doing their research in humanistic departments, have fallen—and still fall—into these misunderstandings.⁶³

I think Vinzent's intent is not very different; he is also dealing with interpretive excesses and traps, but adding something more about *how* this happens so frequently. Early Christianity and Chinese studies are commonly regarded as two different research fields and it is customary to believe that specialists in the first field are not particularly interested—nor are they required to be—in the results achieved in the second (and vice versa). To-be-interested, however, is not an action merely related to personal inclination and curiosity; on the contrary, interest means to be caught up in the game. This involvement explains why, as I have already said, Vinzent's book is not a book about early Christianity, but a book about misleading categories used by scholars, who are thus often unwittingly used by these very categories.

The most important category is chronology: maybe we could say that the whole book is about chronology, or in a broader sense, about time and its effects on our way of doing historical research. Whoever looks at the table of contents immediately understands to what degree the author is questioning the conventional use of chronology. The book opens with a "Postscript," coherently entitled "Turning History Upside Down." It then continues with a "Methodological Introduction" (chapter 1), followed by four chapters, which are four case studies developed against the theoretical background outlined in the first chapter. The last chapter—and how could it be otherwise!—is a "Short Preface at the End." This structure could sound provocative or disturbing to (some?) scholars of early Christianity, but this is exactly the feeling Vinzent wants them to have in their mind. A structure like this has in fact a clear goal: to go against established scholarship radically, not by criticising interpretations, but by showing that almost all interpretations are based on a highly unstable presupposition about chronology.

There is, however, something more. At the end of the "Postscript," Vinzent writes that the case studies "are [not] only the results of a theory, but, as will be seen, the theory itself is born out of writing history" (p. 4). Here is the first hint to the new methodology, which is called "retrospection." In a footnote (p. 4, note 18), Vinzent refers to Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884) as an author who had to do with this puzzling relationship between praxis and theory. His mention—even if it is so fleeting that the name does not even appear in the "Subject Index"—is crucial, and perhaps it would have deserved more space.

⁶³ Actually, Slingerland said something about this point in his previous *What Science Offers the Humanities: Integrating Body and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Droysen's charge against positivism and its "hero" Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) would have been a perfect example of how to openly criticise mainstream scholarship. Droysen, for example, engaged in a tight polemic with philology and posed a fundamental challenge to Rankean historicism: in so doing, Droysen "devalues the Rankean penchant for a self-sufficient concern with the facts, or for a reverential, emphatic relationship with historical individualities."⁶⁴ The cleansing action of the so-called critical method through the removal of errors and manipulations in the transmission of the sources is radically questioned by Droysen, because the source is never (and has never been) a neutral medium. Historical knowledge is always a reshaping of reality, where theory and practice are constantly united. Logic and experimental results are factors important enough to motivate theory change. This entanglement is what Vinzent calls retrospection.

II. A ROAD MAP

The first chapter ("Methodological Introduction") is dedicated to explain what retrospection is. In a footnote in the "Postscript," the author announces a further book about the theoretical framework of this method,⁶⁵ but the material collected in this chapter is sufficient to understand its characteristics. When Vinzent speaks of "retrospection" he is referring to a particular epistemological tradition whose intention is to study how we work daily, that is how we do what we do, or how we are "doing research." The goal of this chapter is to lay bare some of the historiographical, epistemological and theoretical obstacles that have obscured until now the potential of retrospection. Bringing these arguments into the open, Vinzent thinks we can appreciate how we no longer need to be bound by their logic. All these obstacles and traps are carefully listed, along with a series of different ways of dealing with the materials we usually call "sources." In this respect, the chapter is highly programmatic and it can be summarised in a sort of manifesto (or a decalogue) containing the salient characteristic of the retrospective methodology for historical investigation.

1. Anachronism is inbuilt into any historical exegesis (p. 8).
2. No scholar can rid her — or himself of preconceived paradigms (p. 8).
3. The use of categories alien to the period in question should not be criticised (p. 9).

⁶⁴ Michael J. Maclean, "Johann Gustav Droysen and the Development of Historical Hermeneutics," *History and Theory* 21 (1982): 347–65, here 357.

⁶⁵ Only the title is mentioned: "Retrospektion" (p. 4, note 17).

4. We cannot rid ourselves of the task of reflecting on the way we do history (p. 10).

5. We should no longer answer the question “when” and “what,” but rather “how” (p. 12).

6. The material of the past that we are dealing with is not raw matter (p. 16).

7. Theology has been put aside, but teleology is still among us (p. 22).

8. We must stop speaking of “primary sources” and “secondary literature,” and think rather of “objects” (p. 29).

9. In retrospection, we are able to understand people rather than entities (p. 50).

10. “Realia” are props in a process of recreating the past rather than provide an understanding of the process through which we see the past (p. 62).

Some of these statements may sound highly disputable, but the really interesting and challenging aspect is the general aim of the programme. In other words, retrospection seems to be a way of dealing with the problem of the supposed autonomy of any research field. Autonomy is considered achieved when a discipline erects barriers between itself and the outside world. This process, which goes back (more or less) to the end of the 17th century, implies that only historical mastery must be the “price of entry” into the field, drawing a sharp distinction between professionals and amateurs. We all probably agree on this, but we must also take into account how this process introduces another aspect, generally neglected. When a trained student is considered—and considers himself/herself—to have become a scholar, his/her idea of explanation is removed from the empirical and temporal world and grounded in the historical and universal abstractions of its own internal logic.

The illusion of autonomy of the “purely” linguistic order which is asserted by the privilege granted to the internal logic of language, at the expenses of the social conditions and correlates of its social usage, opens the way to all subsequent theories which proceed as if the theoretical mastery of the code sufficed to confer practical mastery of socially appropriate usages.⁶⁶

This is Pierre Bourdieu about language as a medium of power relations (rather than as a means of communication). If you replace the couple linguistic/language with historical/history, this sentence seems to be a reliable abstract on/for the usefulness of retrospection: a battle against the exercise of normativity in historical research.

⁶⁶ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 141–42.

As Vinzent clarifies, this approach does not imply “to subscribe to the postmodern view that writing history is nothing but a creation of one’s own mind” (p. 14) or that retrospective historians create alternative facts. Doing history with retrospection means to consider this activity a “dynamic process,” a resonance “between the agent, the past, and, in a different way, the future” (p. 15). Resonance is a key word that Vinzent borrows from the sociologist Hartmut Rosa. To be brief, in Rosa’s view, resonance is a concept that denotes a specific relationship. Resonance is radically relational and “subjects are always already the result of specific world relations,”⁶⁷ not something one can bring about forcefully.⁶⁸ In other words, the challenge facing the historian is to find a way to proceed in a continuous comings and goings between past and present, without believing that the relationship between the two moments can ever be separated.

III. IN SEARCH OF ARISTIDES AND IGNATIUS

My limited competence prevents me from embarking on a critical examination of the four examples that follow the introductory chapter. I shall confine myself only to two cases, so as to show how the “retrospective machine” works.

The relationship that keeps together the four characters analysed in the correspondent chapters (Abercius, Hyppolitus of Rome, Aristides of Athens, Ignatius of Antioch) is strong: there is no straightforward way to meet each of them. Nevertheless—and this is the most important statement of Vinzent’s method—the standard textbook information about them, even if scant, are clear enough for a reader to form an idea of them. What we read about them, however, is based mainly on tradition. We all agree that tradition is not a historiographical category recognised as reliable at all, but we tend to accept it. Retrospection helps us to better understand how risky this way of acting and thinking is.

The case of Aristides of Athens is a good one to reflect on and show how retrospection works. The sufficient amount of information about Aristides can be found at the beginning of the fourth chapter:

The person at whose door we will knock here is an Athenian philosopher from the second century who called himself by the Greek name of Aristides, but also carried a Latin cognomen, Marcianus. The appearance of a Latin name in a Greek city points to the likelihood that

⁶⁷ Hartmut Rosa, “Für eine affirmative Revolution. Eine Antwort auf meine Kritiker_innen,” in *Resonanzen und Dissonanzen. Hartmut Rosas kritische Theorie in der Diskussion* (ed. Christian H. Peters and Peter Schulz; Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017), 311–29, here 314.

⁶⁸ This is something Rosa has unfolded in his most recent book, *Unverfügbarkeit* (Salzburg: Residenz, 2018).

our philosopher was an immigrant who had moved to Athens, probably from Rome, and retained his older name. It also indicates that Aristides Marcianus was not a (freed) slave, but came from the learned and educated background of an upper-class family (p. 197).

Aristides's works, Vinzent continues, is "not only seen as the oldest fully preserved *Apology* of a Christian author and philosopher" (*ibidem*), but also as something essentially new. Because of this, scholars have been tempted "to jump into the second century to search for answers, to look up the text of the oldest, preserved *Apology* and straightaway to read Aristides, as given in the latest editions" (p. 205). But the situation is much more complicated, because the Greek text only survived as a part of the 11th century novel entitled *Barlaam and Josaphat*, and in three 4th-century fragments on papyrus, then in a Syriac translation (7th century) and in a shorter recension in Armenian.

This variety could be better evaluated and managed through retrospection. As Vinzent puts it,

Given the state of our witnesses, deriving from a range of times, languages and religious-cultural environments, any attempt at re-creating an "original" text is futile, and has rightly been given up by the most recent editors of Aristides' *Apology*. Even though we might use this text with great caution when it comes to getting an insight into second-century Christianity, our retrospective journey has shown that instead of trying to get hold of this "second"-century text, we need to understand first not only our own perspectives and those of previous scholarship, but very importantly define and reflect upon the stage at which the *Apology* was appropriated [...]. Texts like Aristides' *Apology* have therefore to be read first in the light of the reconstructive attempts by contemporary and earlier scholars who want to reconfigure a second-century Christianity. [...] The texts that we are dealing with, however, need to be understood against the background of different geographies and times within which they played key roles in different apologetic discourses, roles that transformed those texts, particularly in contested fields of doctrine, ritual, practices and ethics (pp. 257–58).

This is, according to Vinzent, the retrospective lesson that we can learn from the textual history of Aristides's *Apology*.

Something similar is what we read about Ignatius of Antioch. Vinzent quotes Christine Trevett, who wrote that Ignatius of Antioch "appears on the scene like Melchizedek (*Hebrews* 7,3), without father, mother, genealogy or beginning of days,"⁶⁹ and adds that Ignatius's life is a riddle. Is he a martyr or a bishop? Or both? Or anything but a letter-writer? (p. 268).

All that the letters express is their author's wish to undergo martyrdom in Rome, perhaps one of the reasons why at some later stage various

⁶⁹ This quotation is from Christine Trevett, *A Study of Ignatius of Antioch in Syria and Asia* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1992), but the page is missing.

accounts of his martyrdom were produced. The Martyrdom of Ignatius that is transmitted in a Vatican manuscript incorporates Ignatius' Letter to the Romans. The Martyrdom hints at the seven letters, but does not make much use of them, and it is doubtful whether it really knew their content (pp. 268–69).

The textual tradition of Ignatius' letters is a mess, but according to the *opinio communis*, the middle recension is the accepted authentic version of the letters. But Vinzent asks:

What do we know about the short and longer recensions? Are these three the only ones? [...] These questions have not bothered many scholars recently, but they become core when one approaches the topic in retrospection. [...] Only very few scholars looked into the fact that up to the time of the Reformation not these seven Greek letters, but twelve of them are contained in the collection of Ignatius' letters (p. 269).

At the end of the reading of the four examples (but the two briefly described above are quite sufficient), the reader remains disorientated, unanswered, and a little frustrated. This state of mind is perhaps also that of the author himself: “Increasingly, also, I realised how often I was not qualified to do this or that research, and many times I could only cut out a small portion of entire research fields that opened up in front of me” (p. 469). And in fact, as far as Aristide is concerned, it would be necessary to take in consideration, always and simultaneously, all our witnesses of the *Apology*, the various Greek recensions, the Syriac and the Armenian versions. This job still seems a long way from being done properly. Something similar also happens in the case of Ignatius. “We are lacking an *editio critica maior* of the *Ignatiana*” (pp. 348–49), but in order to pursue this critical edition, we need to take into account all extant witnesses.

Vinzent, however, is not pessimistic at all. To cover the entire research field and to have these *desiderata* a fruitful path has to be followed: retrospection. He/she who thoroughly abides by the ten “rules” illustrated above can contribute to undermining the conservatism that seems to afflict the humanities. However, in order to do that, research groups are needed. This statement seems like a trivial consideration, but actually, looking at the humanities—and at Patristics studies in particular—it is not!

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