Discerning the Initial Arrival of Historicism and Its Importance for The History/Fiction Intersection in The Telling of Lives Lived

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Abstract

A modern sense of historicism developed over time, bringing different texture to the intersection between history and fiction. The life of Jesus of Nazareth, prolifically researched after Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) right until today – a phenomenon broadly known as The Quest for the Historical Jesus – did not in any way cause this development of historicist perspective, but provides an instructive case study for a wider discussion about the intersection between history and fiction in biography and autobiography. As a result of these centuries of Jesuanic research, a set of predictable challenges life-writing may need to confront can be identified. Nevertheless, the depth of disagreement about a well-researched narrative such as the Jesuanic chronicle can eventually feel almost insurmountable. Pessimism, in fact, has become widespread in this entire field of Jesuanic research. Thus, this article raises the question: Is it but a vain attempt, this wish to search for truth that draws a sharp line between history and fiction? More importantly: When did this highly focused search for credible veracity first emerge?

Keywords: Autobiography, Biography, Fiction, Historicism, Quest, Truth

Introduction

How did Western civilization come to a point where it seemed reasonable to become rather preoccupied about the intersection between history and fiction? Why the need to draw sharp, non-negotiable lines when telling the story of a life lived? Specific dilemmas arising in the instructive case study of Jesuanic research only highlights a general historicist spirit which existed within Western culture as a whole, affecting the telling of lives more broadly. For some reason, it began to seem reasonable, after Herman Samuel Reimarus, to start focusing on what might be authentic versus what might be spurious when recounting a life. Reimarus did not cause this change, but he demonstrates its emergence
quite dramatically. Clearly, this new approach was not always the norm. Writings from ancient Rome, Greece and the medieval period are less insistent on constantly discerning the more viable materials from the less persuasive. Mythical and vibrant materials are routinely intertwined. As Dr. Zeba Crook says, "Matthew does not indicate that he thinks the dead walking about Jerusalem might be less reliable a memory than Jesus’ having spoken the parable of the mustard seed." (Crook, 2014). When Tacitus describes a Roman emperor's political machinations, he can sound as astute as a reporter for *The Washington Post* or as clever as Machiavelli's *Prince*. But at the same time, Tacitus can sound like he still takes cosmic omens for granted (Grant, in Tacitus, 1956, p. 22, 23.)

Modern sensitivity to these dilemmas evoked by historicity and facticity are connected, we argue in this paper, to the emergence of what might be called historicism. There is likely not much value in trying to resolutely limit the parameters of meaning for a term such as historicism. Historicism means precisely that everything is and will be permanently in flux, including definitions. But, importantly, in the aura bequeathed by historicism, people are now more attuned to the world of becoming than Being, more connected to the passing of events than the establishment of eternal truths. Consequently, deciphering what is actually real, currently, on an ongoing basis, becomes more important, from a strategic point of view. As people collectively negotiate their way through life and knowledge, they find that they keep pivoting, and they search for ways and times to temporarily drop anchor. The passage of the events is all they retain. The metanarrative disappears, so the details of all the actual micro-narratives become more significant in terms of their transparency and veracity. Robert Palmer summarizes the advent of historicism by saying that people in general "were coming inevitably to think in historical terms, to consider the past as a sequence of facts and processes in time. They were coming to feel that truth should depend on the facts they could observe, rather than that the facts should take their significance from a truth received through other channels. They came to believe in the necessity of evidence… actual events which no rational man should be able to deny." (Palmer, 1947, p. 61).

There are many capable summaries of some of the key factors that served as a backdrop for this emergence of historicism. Those factors were especially a new view of the distant past, the voyages of discovery, the disillusioning impact of the religious wars, the Copernican revolution, and doubts about miracles. Many historians describe these background trends; Gregory Dawes wrote forty excellent pages about it (Dawes, 2001, pp. 1-38). Those trends were a necessary ingredient in the eventual appearance of historicism. A representative researcher such as Reimarus himself could likely not have emerged without these prior events. The ways in which people to this very day imagine the stories of others and themselves relies on these pivotal ice-breakers.

But when, initially, did the spirit of historicism concretely arrive on the scene? We believe it is helpful to probe this historical question prior to delving into those larger background trends visible in the Renaissance, Reformation, and events like Copernican astronomy. Is it possible to figure out more exactly when everything started changing? A reasonable person will argue against such a notion. Interestingly, however, just as the Quest for the Historical Jesus is an illuminating analogue for the issues of life-writing in general (and only an instructive case study, not a cause of historicism), so the period of time antecedent to Reimarus' reconstruction of a proposed facticity in the gospels is an illuminating period in terms of showcasing the very earliest hints of historicist thinking in...
general. Although it is likely impossible to say exactly when historicist thinking began to predominate throughout western civilization, Michel Foucault once tried to nail it down to 1580-1650. His decision was surprising partly because Foucault was notorious for usually evading the disciplines of historical exactitude. God, said Foucault, was once presumed to be governing the universe: "An entirely finalist world, an anthropocentric world, a world of prodigies, marvels and signs, and finally a world of analogies and ciphers, constitute the manifest form of God’s pastoral government of the world. This is what disappeared. When? Precisely between 1580 and 1650...a de-governmentalization of the cosmos." (Foucault, 2007, p. 236.)

It would be difficult to convince the global community that such Foucaultian dating is iron-clad. But the concession can be made that historicism definitely emerged somewhere in that period prior to Reimarus, for he does exemplify it in astounding ways. People apparently started caring, more often and deeply than they used to, about the difference between what is real and what is not, what really happened and what might be fictional. Thus, although scholars cannot determine exactly when historicism showed up, changes can be observed in a startling way in Jesuanic ruminations preceding Reimarus. This development is arguably relevant for life-writing in general, not just the narrative of the Nazarene. Something momentous seemed to be changing, with potential impact on the history/fiction divide in general life-writing since that time.

The methodology in this paper, then, is not a more typically causal type of historiography. Rather, the paper looks for symptomatic signs of underlying changes. Other examples and case studies could therefore be easily used by other researchers. The paper also does not judge any thinkers, as if earlier thinkers are to be somehow chastised for not seeing what later thinkers observed. Given that a spirit of historicism eventually emerged in Western civilization, the paper tries to find early clues to its advent. We proceed by first looking at a figurine from around 1350 in Northern France, where one can see a subtle hint of the upcoming trajectory towards historicism. Then we jump ahead briefly to Blaise Pascal, 1623-1662, where researchers can detect a much clearer shift into the new ways of thinking. Jumping backwards from that by a century, we take a peek at another great thinker, Desiderius Erasmus. This hopping back and forth shows that, for some inexplicable reason, Erasmus was simply not able to think in the same manner as Pascal, even though they are both recognized as eminent scholars with sharp minds. Neither thinker is better or worse than the other; these are not judgments, just attempts to understand when something was arriving that did not exist before. We then survey a large canvas by Bruegel, painted halfway between Erasmus and Pascal. Its visual language speaks, more loudly than the written word and prominent thinkers. Pictures are indeed worth a thousand words. We further consider the interesting lack of historicist thinking in the Reformation era heretics, as well as the ironical decision by Reformation leaders to publish Synoptic Harmonies in parallel columns. We show that these theologians likely did not anticipate the historicism whose coming existence they were revealing with such a manoeuvre.

An ivory figurine from Northern France, 1350

In the ivory piece below (see Figure 1), there is a clear sign of non-historicist thinking, and yet containing some early hints of change. In the figurine, the apostles are observing the Ascension of Jesus; the historical Jesus is leaving this earth and going up into heaven. At first glance one assumes these are the twelve disciples who originally followed Jesus. This anonymous artwork is from 1325-1375 in

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northern France. The ascending Christ himself was originally part of this piece, or likely a set of pieces. (Lowden and Cherry, 2015, p. 109). It is about six inches across and is now in the Thompson collection of figurines in the Art Gallery of Toronto.

It is intriguing that, while most of the figures are looking upwards ["Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? – Acts 1:11], at least one of them – the chap in the left-hand group, third from the left and in the back row – is looking down, or almost askance, as if the event has lost his interest. The artist, one might say, anticipates thereby the first hint of the coming waves of historicism in the next seven centuries. It is amazing to consider that their eyes could be pulled back down towards the mundane features of earthly reality at such a climactic moment. But the sculptor might also be alluding to Matthew's version of the departure, where it says: "When they saw Him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." (Matthew 28:17). In any case, the inklings of future concentration on facticity and present history are emerging already here, in this earth-focused glance.

The most interesting feature is that a few of the men, in the righthand panel, are visibly waving farewell. This seems bizarre. In the original source material inspiring this art work, it is the ascending Jesus who is graciously providing a final benediction. In the Lukan narrative, this forms a literary inclusio with the beginning of his gospel, where the priest, Zechariah, is unable to pronounce the opening invocation of the worship service; Zechariah has been struck mute due to his skepticism about fathering John the Baptist. From a literary point of view, there is deep satisfaction for the reader of Luke's Gospel in having this trauma corrected by the departing Jesus, who now gives a farewell blessing ("While he was blessing them, he left them…" Luke 24:51).

For the artist to invert this focus, and to highlight instead the chagrin, the humanity, and the curiosity of the bereft followers is quite intriguing. This epicentre of salvation history has been artistically re-rerouted so that it is no longer about Jesus, but about ourselves. "Here we are; what is next? Where did he go? What should we do now? Bye-bye… what is going on? Bye-bye… see you later?" The entire majesty of the event has been automatically trivialized, not as a judgment, but in the sense of historicized. The meta-narrative has become a curiosity, with the result that the details of the micro-narrative start shifting into focus. Inevitably, interpreters might well begin to wonder what was historical and what was fictional.

Regarding parameters of fictionality, it is noteworthy, for example, that the twelve disciples are not the original twelve. The figurine, for a modern critic, is inaccurate. Judas had in any case been replaced by the time of the Ascension. But more notably, this group of twelve includes Paul (with the sword), opposite Peter, who holds the keys of the Kingdom granted by Jesus in Matthew 16:19 (Lowden and Cherry, 2015, p. 109). But in actual fact, Paul was not at the Ascension, as is clear from the Book of Acts which records his much later conversion. Furthermore, by including Paul, and yet depicting it as a group of only twelve, some other apostle must have been excluded. Who was excluded? What is noteworthy is precisely the fact that these historicized preoccupations do not concern the medieval artist. The average believer apparently remained convinced that the metanarrative makes sense and that it is permissible to run roughshod over historical persnickety pedants. Various details are simply crammed together and have become part of an overall system. Paul, interestingly, is not one of the figures who is waving farewell; he is pointing, as in a gesticulation, as a Teacher would do. Paul is the pre-eminent theologian,
an artistic concession to the medieval ecclesiastical consensus.

Two of the disciples have books in their hands. Were these two of the four Gospel writers? No divergence was felt between Epistolary and Synoptic materials, because the populace apparently did not worry too much yet about the history/fiction issues. It is also possible that the two books reference the Old and New Testament. In either case, the issue does not need to be resolved for today's historian. What is clear is simply that various materials have been grouped together and seem to tell the same overarching story. But the apostles in the ivory do seem a bit confused now. One can almost imagine them thinking: "Bye-bye. Why did He leave us alone? Why and how and when should we begin to search for Him and have a Quest for Him? Maybe we should stop being concerned about heaven. Maybe we should just look straight ahead. Maybe we should concentrate on our day to day lives and start making appropriate distinctions between what is real and what is apparent."

Blaise Pascal, (1623-1662)

A revealing shift in the focus towards historicizing types of arguments becomes apparent in Blaise Pascal's thinking. He is famous in popular culture as well as the history of philosophy for The Wager Argument for God’s existence (Pascal, 1966, Section #418). But perhaps Pascal should be remembered more for reallocating faith’s ground to the historical realm, which is also the realm where the eventual Quest for Jesus takes place.

Pascal was enough of a great scientist, logician, polemicist and ground-breaking mathematician to sense that the various cosmological proofs for God’s existence were no longer compelling. In his approach, they were non-historicized approaches. Any proof having to do with ontology, stasis, design, philosophy, created order, intellectual inevitability – Pascal realized these old ways of persuading the heart had crumbled. “The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake.” (Pascal, 1966, Section #190). In that quote, historicism has already bared its teeth: Logic itself, as a discipline within philosophy, is becoming episodic in Pascal's approach.

It is intriguing – a harbinger of momentous change within the development of Western civilization – that this brilliant, conscientious mind veered instead into the historicizing track of prophecy and fulfillment. His arguments have switched to this new terrain – the field of temporaneity, process, consequential evidence, sequential impressionism. As Pascal puts it, “...with the fulfilment of all the prophecies the Messiah has been proved forever.” (Pascal, 1966, Section #282). In still another aphorism he says: “The most weighty proofs of Jesus are the prophecies...” (Pascal, 1966, Section #335).

Just as it is still done today by evangelical fundamentalists such as Josh McDowell (McDowell, 1972 and 1975), Pascal occasionally even creates long lists of the various prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures he believed were explicitly fulfilled by the coming of Christ (Pascal, 1966, Section #487). But Pascal, throughout his Pensees, was energetically constructing these lists when it was not yet so clear, as it is today, that the lists are fraught with too many incidentals and stray variables. Today it is more obvious that Pascal is engaging in hermeneutical gymnastics, retrospective wish fulfilments,
unfounded presumptions about a Benevolent
Conspirator pulling numerous historical
strings. As Nietzsche noted, in a more aware
age: “The entire life of Christ is so presented
[by Pascal] as to help to justify the
prophecies: [Jesus] acts in this way in order
that they may be justified.” (Nietzsche, 1968,
Section #188).

Pascal was riveted by the idea that the
prophecies come from many prognosticators,
not just one (Pascal, 1966, Section #332).
Scholars do not know precisely how much
weight the role of prophecy and fulfillment
played in his personal conversion document,
found sewn into his clothing after his death
(Pascal, 1966, Section #913). But his other
writings do include this poignant personal
testimony: “Thus I stretch out my arms to my
Saviour, who, after being foretold for four
thousand years, came on earth to die and
suffer for me at the time and in the
circumstances foretold. By his grace I
peaceably await death, in the hope of being
eternally united to him, and meanwhile I live
joyfully, whether in the blessings which he is
pleased to bestow on me or in the afflictions
he sends me for my own good and taught me
how to endure by his example.” (Pascal, 1966,
Section #793).

The careful reader – the affectionate
and non-judgmental reader – also notices that
cracks already begin to appear within this new
historicized foundation. Once he says, for
example, “The prophecies were ambiguous;
they are so no longer.” (Pascal, 1966,
Section #718). Was there an urgent need to make this
affirmation? In a slightly more prolonged
tangent, Pascal muses: “The proofs drawn
from Scripture by Jesus and the Apostles are
not conclusive, for they only say that Moses
said that a prophet would come, but this does
not prove that he was the one, and that was
the whole question. These passages serve
therefore only to show that there is nothing
against Scripture in this, and that no
inconsistency is apparent, but not that there is
agreement. Now this is sufficient; no
inconsistency, together with miracles.”
(Pascal, 1966, Section #840).

It seems ironical, as noted above, that
Pascal is renowned for his philosophical,
logical, mathematical passage on The Wager
– for the most telling wager he lays down is
this one: “...What crowns it all is that it was
foretold, so that no one could say it was the
effect of chance. Anyone with only a week to
live will not find it in his interest to believe
that all this is just a matter of chance. Now, if
we were not bound by our passions, a week
and a hundred years would come to the same
thing.” (Pascal, 1966, Section #326).

Take a chance, then; wager that it was
all prophesied, and it was all fulfilled. Stay
with the historicized realm rather than logic or
systems.

**Comparing Pascal to Erasmus (ca. 1467-
1536)**

This switch to the historicizing realm,
so vivid in Pascal and so necessary for the
later emergence of a compulsion to locate
factual authenticities, is not yet readily
apparent in a prominent Renaissance man like
Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. We
emphasize that this is not a chastisement of
Erasmus, merely part of an attempt to
understand when historicized modes of
perception became more dominant in society
as a whole. Erasmus lived more than a century
before Pascal, and the difference in tone is
remarkable. For example, when Erasmus
explains the communication strategy St. Peter
uses in his first sermon, Erasmus seems
unaware that he, as a Renaissance scholar, is
dealing with a historicist minefield that could
theoretically invite a Quest: “...he [St. Peter,
on the original Pentecost Sunday] does not yet
declare that Christ is both God and man; this
mystery he reserves until its proper time. For
the present he calls him just a man and declares him to be the Lord and the Messiah...” (Rummel, 1990, p. 208). With this non-curious attitude towards historical sequencing, Erasmus shows that his aeon is still some ways away from the sceptical attitude of the historicist Enlightenment. If Erasmus had lived later, he might have noticed in this Pentecost story a Lukan editor recasting some possible Petrine material. Furthermore, he might have spotted the unwitting (and highly revealing) appearance of an early adoptionist Christology. Instead, Erasmus postulates a calculated reticence on St. Peter’s part to explain the full truth of the 5th century Council of Chalcedon for an audience that might not be able to absorb the entire veracity yet. Erasmus simply does not notice the historicizing questions begging to be addressed here. Again, as emphasized, this is not a critique of Erasmus, but an attempt to appreciate the difference in time.

In a similar manner, when Erasmus analyzes Paul’s communication with the Athenians in the Acts of the Apostles, it fails to occur to Erasmus that he, from his vantage point in the 1500’s, is ignoring ancient chronological conundrums. When Paul sees an altar in Athens erected in homage to An Unknown God, the apostle in Erasmus’ reading “twists it into evidence for their faith, with the alteration and omission of several words; nor does he as yet call Christ anything but a man, by whom God had ordained....etc.” (Rummel, 1990, p. 208). Non-historicized interpretations such as this make the assumption Paul had a choice – that Paul could have articulated a theology about Jesus that did not yet exist. Instead, 20th-century interpreters can delight in spying in Paul’s Athenian speech a Jesus who was seemingly only a man – someone who thereby confirms the centuries-long questing endeavour is requisite. At the same time, modern minds can acknowledge with fascination that Paul goes on to tell the Athenians God appointed this singular individual to rise from the dead as a summons towards global repentance. The history/fiction problem almost glares out at modern readers, but Erasmus did not see it, not because he lacked ability, but because his time was different. He regarded the books of the Bible, according to Huizinga, as “a crystalline source” and encouraged a constant return to "the sources of Christianity itself" as if no devastating problems could possibly emerge when doing so (Huizinga, 1957, p. 70). Surely, the sources would stand firm.

Erasmus was repeatedly frustrated by Martin Luther’s brash manner. These irritations provide an additional window into Erasmus' non-historicized thinking. He liked Luther’s fresh thinking, but often felt Luther should be more tactful, less confrontational. He wrote personal letters to Luther to this effect. Wisdom, he counseled, suggests one should deal with less intimidating topics before tackling the weightier issues. With this in mind, Erasmus makes a revealing and naïve comment about the different strategies employed by Jesus and Luther. Jesus, unlike Luther, was less confrontational and did not always bluntly reveal all the full truths which theology can offer: "Christ told his followers to preach first about repentance and the coming Kingdom of God and keep silence about Christ.” (Rummel, 1990, p. 207). Luther should learn from Christ’s wise reticence and not constantly barge in by tackling the most serious topics. Instead, (just like the historical Jesus did), keep the deep materials – about Christ, God, divinity of Jesus, justification, the pope, indulgences, church/state relations, etc. – for later divulging, but begin with lighter topics like repentance and the Kingdom. As if Jesus purposely kept Christological reflection to a minimum. Such a non-historicized approach totally overlooks the gaping invitation to start a Jesus quest. Far from being a judgment of Erasmus, this is merely the benefit of hindsight, as scholars
can now detect the initial emergence of historicism now, but not then.

This non-historicizing atmosphere is manifestly different from Pascal's intellectual context, only 100 years later. And yet, how peculiar. Erasmus was radical enough to carefully translate the entire Second Testament from Greek. Erasmus was thus more familiar with the whole gamut of the Jesuanic narrative than most people. If anyone, this competent thinker could reasonably have been expected to develop a more acute sense of historicity and its possible conundrums than most of his contemporaries. Noting, then, the completely nonhistoricist nature of his reasoning as compared with Pascal is quite startling. How could this be, given his incredible brilliance as a humanist scholar? "Erasmus perhaps never quite realized how much his philological-critical method must shake the foundations of the Church." (Huizinga, 1957, p. 71). Besides his own scholarly edition of the Greek text, Erasmus was accompanied by the Renaissance's "growing concern with linguistic and textual study" as well as "Lorenzo Valla's study of the Vulgate" and, in general, "an ever-increasing interest in Hebraica". (Paget, in Bockmuehl, 2001, p. 140). And yet, Erasmus still could not take the step towards thinking in a historicized fashion. The type of skeptical inquiry conducted by a Herman Reimarus could not ensue yet in that earlier age. The soil had yet to be tilled.

And yet, it also seems highly intriguing that in each of the above examples from Erasmus – reviewing alleged strategy in Peter, Paul, and Jesus – Erasmus is imputing to these characters from the past the ability to think ahead. Erasmus only seems to lack the ability to think retroactively about the anticipatory flashes of historical processing he was attributing to them. A genuinely historicist type of thinking – the type of thinking fully imbued with time’s passing – was coming; it had simply not yet arrived. David Steinmetz rightly says, "For Luther and Calvin, to say nothing of their Catholic and Protestant contemporaries, the historical Jesus was precisely the Jesus who was portrayed in the Gospels. Sixteenth-century theologians saw no slippage between the biblical portrait of Jesus and the historical reality that lay behind it, even though they were well aware of some difficulties in the biblical text. In the end, they regarded such difficulties as theologically trivial and capable of satisfactory resolution through renewed study." (Steinmetz, in Gaventa and Hays, 2008, p. 270). Erasmus was different from those strident Reformers, more peaceful, quiet, tolerant. In principle, that non-feisty attitude could have made Erasmus much more sanguine also about the intersection between history and fiction. "He hated that spirit of absolute assuredness so inseparably bound up with the reformers." (Huizinga, 1957, p. 108). And yet: Erasmus, just like those Reformers, could not foresee the imminent historicist tsunami.

Non-historicist Heretics

Even the radical heretics of the pre-Quest period could not problematize their theological objections in a historicized fashion. During that very epoch of the Reformation, for example, both Laelius Socinus (1525-1562) and Michael Servetus (1511-1553) denied the divinity of Christ and "regarded him as only a prophet and founder of a religion. However, they found no problems in the life of Jesus, nor did they apply the methods of historical criticism to the gospels." (Kissinger, 1985, p. 14). This is a surprising disconnect. Imagine how effective the heretical rhetoric of Socinus and Servetus might have become if they had employed such historiographically critical modes of thinking. They would have beaten Reimarus to the punch. On the other hand, imagine how
impossible it would have been for John Calvin (1509-1564) to understand their contrarian argumentation while he argued in favor of burning Servetus at the stake in 1553. The language for historicizing types of discourse was simply not in the air. It was available to neither the orthodox nor the heterodox. Calvin and Servetus were still in the same boat, along with the gentler Erasmus. They all naively presumed history and fiction were legitimately and usually coterminous, not because they were incompetent – far from it! – but because the times had not yet changed enough.

A Pieter Bruegel painting, 1564

There is a revealing historicist moment in the time right between Erasmus and Pascal. Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569) made a remarkable painting displaying an early premonition of the historicist perspective, a distanced point of view. Again, in light of our methodology, other researchers could choose other revelatory moments or case studies. In The Procession to Calvary (next page) the common people around 26 Anno Domine are busy with their daily tasks on the extreme left of the canvas and are the least interested in the supposedly momentous events that are happening; there are also some mourners in rich and carefully draped dress. "The world is beautiful and seductive," concludes Bertolt Brecht about the overall Bruegel scene (Brecht, 1964, p. 158). What is significant here is not simply the implicit historical detail that some people in 26 CE may, in fact, have been unmoved by events near-at-hand. Rather, the significance lies in the Renaissance act of imagining that original remoteness. The ability to distantiate, to suddenly grasp that what preachers and

liturgies are constantly talking about might not have been that big of a deal, way back then… this represents the emergence of that historicist perspective we are trying to understand in this paper. Just because God cares about something does not imply everyone else did or should.

In 2010, national and international media kept referring to "The Vancouver Olympics", as if this news story implicated the entire city, or even the whole country. In actuality, however, it was mainly the ticket-holders in the downtown core who were Vancouverites, strictly speaking, during these hockey-crazed episodes. But for Bruegel to envision in 1564 that many ordinary people might not have cared about yet another funereal crucifixion parade in 30 CE, so common in ancient Rome, is a breath-taking reflexive internalization of the embryonic sense of a new relativism. It had become possible to take a step back from what is allegedly significant and take a dispassionate point of view, a panoramic perspective.

As any modern casual observer can detect, Bruegel's painting combines aspects of the landscape in ancient Palestine with other features that belong more to 16th century Belgium, such as a windmill. He is also willing to conflate the past and the present in other ways, e.g. showing the two thieves crucified with Jesus as people who are making confession to medieval priests. If the viewer looks carefully, it is possible to see that the two crosses preordained for the thieves have already been planted. A hole is being dug between those two crosses, which will be for inserting the beams Christ will hang upon. Looking closely – as many of the peasants at that time were apparently not doing – viewers can see Christ dragging his cross along the

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1 While Calvin was influential in the decision, he was not actually at the event. He did not light the flame, as myth would have it.
road. Other than Christ, many other people in the painting are actually wearing 16th century clothing.

In short, the religious meaning of the event of the procession to the cross is pictorially detached by Bruegel from the allusions to both its original historicity and its contemporaneous relevance. Bruegel's determination to enact this disjoinedness into the heart of his portrait shows that the emergence of the new historicism is not just accidental. The artist has explicitly embraced the feeling that there might be a disconnect between what has been taught to the masses, and what the masses at that original time were actually perceiving and/or ignoring. Religion and church teachings are one thing; what actually transpired is another. That distinction, which probes the heart of the history/fiction divide, lies at the core of the future Quest, as an instructive case study for life-writing in general. In this painting by Bruegel, one can sense that historicism is on the doorstep.

Somewhere between the deaths of Erasmus (1536) and Pascal (1662) a decisive transformation occurred. (Foucault was not too far off when he pinpointed 1580-1650!) People were realizing old claims about the subject might not matter as much as previously assumed. Pieter Bruegel noticed there were alternative modes of perceiving old truths. History and fiction were no longer aligned in the ways of yore. This historicist shift involved profound relativization.

16th century Reformation Harmonies

As mentioned above, we intended to demonstrate there was a slight beginning of historicist thinking visible in a figurine of 1350, and to then jump ahead to a more robust example in Pascal, and from there backwards to Erasmus, ending with Bruegel in the middle of those two thinkers. We are trying to grasp when historicist thinking first arrived, so that we can better understand what happened to life-writing in our modern world ever since Reimarus, as merely one example but a strong one, started dissecting history and fiction in our case study, the story of Jesus. We will now notice how the widespread original lack of historicistic thinking prior to Reimarus was dramatically apparent in the publication, for the first time ever, of various gospel Harmonies published in parallel columns.

This printing of comparable columns shows a naïve undercurrent to the new scientific swagger within this sixteenth century. The technology of the printing press was partly responsible, since this act was now logistically possible. Of note, says Kissinger, "some of the most prestigious figures of the Reformation were compilers of harmonies. Among them were Bucer, Osiander, Calvin, and Flacus… as many as thirty-five gospel harmonies appeared in the sixteenth century, more than had been written in the fourteen preceding centuries…" (Kissinger, 1985, p. 12, 13).

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But these leaders seemed to assemble the conglomeration of fictional and historical facts without the slightest worry they might be inviting a pastoral and scientific catastrophe. They seemed to assume most regular folks would only be mildly curious about published historical discrepancies, rather than traumatized. They likely felt sure that if anyone
would become obsessed by the numerous random and assuredly minute differences, they would eventually be pacified in their souls. It is as if they were saying "Everything will always sort itself out; we are so convinced of this we can show our entire hand."

Who could have guessed this initial bravado would collapse centuries later into the cauldron of Bultmann's thoroughgoing 1921 *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, in which not one reliability stone is left upon another? (Bultmann, 1963). The equivalent columns now morph into a hermeneutical war-machine tossing cannon balls with thousands of exegetical casualties.

Reading between the lines, an astute reader can sense the premonitions of the later historicist worries in a famous sermon like that of Samuel Danforth in New England in 1670, when he tangentially refers in a subordinate clause to "what the holy evangelists do harmoniously relate concerning Him." (Danforth, 1670). The preacher thereby signals to his congregation that he has examined everything about the historical Jesus, and he has found no irresolvable problems. The parishioners are implicitly invited to look for themselves, but they are not obligated to do so; it has been done.

One example of three texts in parallel is the healing of the leper (Aland, 1972, p. 39,40) (see Figure 3). Looking at a concrete example such as this, two basic options seem to be available. One alternative is to say, "This is not a big deal; all the differences are minor." And indeed, it is certainly clear the three writers are dealing with the identical tale (clearer in this illustration, in fact, than in many others). By publishing the parallel columns, the leaders of the Reformation were assuming the first option would be the general reaction. This demonstrates their lack of historical imagination (not as criticism of them, but as revealing of the time-period).

The other option is to let one's mind wander down various insidious historicist pathways. For example: It seems obvious there is some copying going on. Even the idiosyncratic Greek word orders were often faithfully followed. Who is copying whom? Who was first? And how can this actually be about directly imparted divine "inspiration" if people are running around copying others?

Secondly, why are there some unexpectedly weird omissions – such as Mark's "moved with compassion" being left out by both Matthew and Luke? Was that phrase not in their textual edition? Did they have a theological objection to including it? Or is it rather the case they never had it, but Mark added it? Why would Mark add something two others (consensually?) agree to leave out?

And why the bizarre divergences? For example, why is "kneeling" in Mark apparently transformed into "worshiping" in Matthew but into "falling on his face" in Luke? It would probably be possible – no exaggeration – to write an entire PhD dissertation on only this question. For example, is "worshiping" Jesus something that became more common in the church by the time of Matthew in the 70s and 80s CE than Mark in 68 CE, and is "falling on one's face" something Luke's Gentile audience would have understood better than the "worshipping" of Matthew's more Jewish audience? Why would they both, independently, have felt mere "kneeling" was insufficiently descriptive on Mark's part?

Why are Matthew and Luke, apparently in isolation but perhaps both committed to more sophisticated grammar, seemingly intent on changing Mark's use of the Historical Present ("says") so it becomes the participle "saying"? Is Mark routinely a bit uncouth? Does God's Holy Spirit interact with coarse penmanship just as well as with refined erudition?
Were the Gospel writers, to some extent, narrators? Did they have themes around which they made their materials coalesce? Might that be, for example, why *compassion* shows up in Mark, i.e. that Mark was working with a strand that was not quite as top-of-mind for the other authors? Are readers dealing with storytellers more than reporters, and is it then possible that a lot of it might simply be made up? Why should interpreters trust someone beholden to a theme?

In short, publishing the Gospels in parallel columns inadvertently turns the entire orbit of holy writ into an object of research Nietzsche might have called *human, all too human*. The sheen comes off. The doors are opened, and the troops come marching in, looking for ways to demarcate history and fiction. These are early indicators of the appearance of the problem and the adventure of historicism.

**Conclusion**

In short, it is possible to detect approximately when historicist thinking first arrived, so that we can better understand what happened to life-writing in our modern world ever since Reimarus started dissecting history and fiction in the story of Jesus. Reimarus did not cause the new ways of life-writing, but he is one clairvoyant example of the trend. Revealingly, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) fits right within Foucault's general target of 1580-1650, and Descartes strove valiantly to find a solid point of reference from which to distinguish fiction and history. The telling of lives lived, today, exists without a metanarrative, and so the veracity of the details become more urgent.

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**References**


Figure 1. Anonymous.
Figure 2. P. Bruegel, The Procession to Calvary, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Retrieved at https://www.artbible.info/art/large/266.html.
Matthew 8:2-3
And behold, a leper came and 
worships him, saying Lord, if you wish I can be cleansed. 
And he stretched out his hand and touched him, saying: 
I wish it; be cleansed. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

Mark 1:40-42
And, calling out to him there comes to him a leper and kneeling and says to him If you wish I can be cleansed. And, moved with compassion he stretched out his hand and touched him and says to him: I wish it; be cleansed And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed.

Luke 5:12-13
And behold a man full of leprosy But, upon seeing Jesus he fell upon his face and requested him, saying Lord, if you wish, I can be cleansed. And he stretched out his hand and touched him, saying: I wish it; be cleansed. And immediately the leprosy left him.

Figure 3. Healing of The Leper.