CHAPTER TEN

“CAN YESTERDAY GET BETTER?” THE TROUBLE WITH MEMORY AND THE GIFT OF THE EUCHARIST
SYSTEMATIC-THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

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1 “CAN YESTERDAY GET BETTER?” REFLECTIONS ON A LIMINAL THOUGHT

The groves of academe bring forth some strange fruits! Or so it would seem when two leading historiographers engage in a disputation, albeit a friendly one, about a cartoon strip. The two academics in question are Jörn Rüsen and Ernst Schulin, and the comic strip is Charles M. Schulz’s Peanuts, known for its deep philosophical insights. In the particular strip that inspired this debate, the melancholic Charlie Brown responds to a question from his friend Linus. “I guess it’s wrong to always worry about tomorrow”, muses Linus. “Maybe we should only worry about today”. To which Charlie Brown replies, “No, that’s giving up. I’m hoping that yesterday will get better” (Schulz 1979, no. 699).

The debate was triggered by the fact that Jörn Rüsen had used this last sentence, not without irony, as the motto for one of his collection of essays on the theory of history. In one of these essays, “Die vier Typen des historischen Erzählens” (The four types of historical narrative), he reflects on the function of the meaning formation or sense-making (Sin nbildung) that we call “history” (Rüsen 1990). In the process he builds on the (post-Kantian) tradition of historiography that conceives of history as a process of construction (cf. Lorenz 1987). The basic idea is that historical thinking is a mental procedure in which the human past is made present or “re-presented”. In order to become history, the past must first be transformed, which is done by narratively establishing an inner connection between past and present. In his essay, Rüsen considers the question of why it makes “sense” (Sinn) to human beings to “transform” the past into history, and what conditions must be met for this to occur. The answers that Rüsen ultimately arrives at are condensed
into the succinct formula: “Historical narrative as a way of making of sense of temporal experience through remembrance”1 (157). Rüsen’s fundamental insight is that the interest in the construction of “history” is rooted in the present desire for orientation of a subject existing in time, which places itself in a qualified relation to the past because it experiences time as a threat of loss of self as a result of the changing of its world and of its self. By forming meaning, or “making sense” of temporal experience (157) the historian to some extent gainsays the experience of time as negation and loss. This is done, according to Rüsen, through the medium of narrative, which establishes the relation between the past, which is present in memory, to the present. At the same time, this narrative meaning-formation makes “sense” only inasmuch as experiences of the past can be related to present-day praxis, so as to orient the recognition, action and suffering of human beings. Historical thinking provides an orientation knowledge that enables experiences and expectations of time to be integrated in such a way that we human beings do not lose our selfhood in the flow of time. If we consider, moreover, that through this process historical thinking seeks to contribute to a human search for meaning that endeavours to feed this past into intentional and especially future-oriented human action, then one thing above all becomes clear: The historical gaze at the past is not only a way of allowing us to make sense of contemporary life. Rather, it also aspires to show future perspectives for human action and consequently claims nothing less than that the past is overflowing with expectations.

But what does all of this mean for the past? On the one hand, memory protects the past from being forgotten; historical thinking is interested in the preservation of everything transitory. At the same time, by re-presenting the past as present in story—or history—form, historical narrative claims nothing less than that this present is the future of the past. And insofar as this present in turn is open toward the future, the re-presented past contains future opportunities that extend beyond therspective nows of memory.

So is Charlie Brown’s hope justified? Can yesterday get better? Ernst Schulin, plumbing the depths and shallows of what he describes as the

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1 To the best of our knowledge, the works cited have not been published in English translation. Therefore, all quoted passages are this translator’s renderings of passages which are German in the original.—B. Schultz.