# "The past perfect and the present tense" A comparison between three treatises on the ethics of historical practice

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the relation between three different texts that reflect upon the writing of history. One text is a polemical work How to Write History, written by Lucian of Samosata in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, on the virtues and vices of historians. The other two texts are theoretical treatises on the ethics of historical practice from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After a discussion on the content and literary context of How to Write History, a conclusion is drawn on the nature of the work by means of a comparison with the two other texts. Can How to Write History be considered as a theoretical article on the ethics of the historical practice or is it a satirical criticism with no theoretical grounding? In this paper I argue that How to Write History can indeed be seen a theoretical treatise on the writing of history and moreover that there are not so many differences between the three treatises as there appear to be on first sight.

**Keywords:** *Historiography, Second Sophistic, Lucian of Samosata, Peter Novick, David Harlan.* 

# Introduction

"Τοιουντοί οῦν μοι ὁ συγγραφεὺί ἔστω—ἄφοβοί, ἀδέκαστοί, ἐλεύθεροί, παρρησίαι καὶ ἀληθείαι φίλοι, ὡἱ ὁ κωμικόι φησι, τὰ συνκα συνκα, τὴν σκάφην δὲ σκάφην ὀνομάσων, οὐ μίσει οὐδὲ φιλία τι νέμων οὐδὲ φειδόμενοι ἢ ἐλεων ἢ αἰσχυνόμενοι ἢ δυσωπούμενοι, ἴσοι δικαστήι, εὕνουι ἅπασιν ἄχρι του' μὴ θατέρω τι ἀπονειμαι πλει'ον του' δέοντοι, ξένοι ἐν τοι'ι βιβλίοι

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The idea of the quote is taken from Sue Alcock's article 'Greece: a landscape of resistance?', in D.J. Mattingly (ed.), *Dialogues in Roman imperialism: power, discourse, and discrepant experience in the Roman Empire* (Portsmouth R.I. 1997). This article in based on a paper written for the Historical Theory course by dr. Herman Paul, at Leiden University.

καὶ ἄπολιἱ, αὐτόνομοἱ, ἀβασίλευτοἱ, οὐ τί τῷδε ἢ τῷδε δόξει λογιζόμενοἱ, ἀλλὰ τί πέπρακται λέγων."

"This, then, is the sort of man a historian should be: fearless, incorruptible, free, a friend of free expression and the truth, intent, as the comic poet says, on calling a fig a fig and a trough a trough, giving nothing to hatred or to friendship, sparing no one, showing neither pity nor shame nor obsequiousness, an impartial judge, well disposed to all men up to the point of not giving one side more than its due, in his books a stranger and a man without a country, independent, subject to no sovereign, not reckoning what this or that man will think, but stating the facts."<sup>2</sup>

This quote comes from How to Write History, a work of Lucian of Samosata, a 2nd-century writer from Asia Minor. In the work, composed as a letter to a certain Philo, Lucian discusses contemporary historians, enumerates pitfalls in the practice of historiography and gives standards for good historical practice. While reading How to Write History I was intrigued by this work and the connection it has with modern articles on the historiographical practises. Can How to Write History be considered as a theoretical article on the ethics of the historical practice like Peter Novick's "The (death of the) ethics of historical practice"? Or are the differences in the treatises too big for the works to be the same genre? Should we see the text as giving practical advice without expanding on any theory behind it? And if so, can one consider a mere list of practicalities as a theoretical treatise?<sup>3</sup> Or is How to Write History not a serious discussion of historiography at all and can we only understand it as a satirical text, not to be taken at face value in any way? On should bear in mind that titles of ancient works were often only attached during the manuscript tradition in the Middle Ages and thus are not chosen by the authors of the text. In this article I hope to answer these questions by placing the text in the historical and literary context of that time and comparing it with two articles on the ethics of historical practice, by Peter Novick and David Harlan. The main question I will try to answer is: To what extent can Lucian's How to Write History? be seen as a theoretical treatise on the ethics of a historian?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Lucian, *How to Write History*, 41. All translations, unless stated otherwise, are taken from the Loeb Classical Library (ed. T.E. Page et al., 1959), trans. K. Kilburn. The Greek text is from the Thesaurus Lingua Graeca.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> One could argue that a book with cooking recipes does write down the do's and dont's for cooking a meal but does not necessarily encompasses a theoratical framework for matching tastes and a balanced diet.

In the first part the contents of the text are discussed. It describes the historical events Lucian narrates about and the historians that Lucian criticises in his work. Also the historians and their works that Lucian uses as exemplum for others will be considered. What are the rules of historical practice that Lucian writes down? The second part focuses on the literary discourse in which this text has been written, by discussing how the text relates to other works within Lucian's oeuvre and to works in the same genre from other writers. What is the discourse on historical practice that Lucian is writing in? Which other theoretical works on history have been written before Lucian? The last part will be a comparison between Lucian's work and two modern treatises on the ethics of historical practice. How much has the image of a good historian changed over time? To what extent do the texts differ? Can these differences be explained? I have chosen the articles of Novick and Harlan because they both deal with the same question as Lucian deals with: What is the main goal of writing history? And how should a historian work in her/his profession? Also the two treatises discuss the historical practice in the United States, and thus cover both the same range of developments.

This comparison will be an asymmetrical comparison<sup>4</sup> since I will use both Novick's and Harlan's articles to further our understanding of How to Write History. As Lucian and his work will receive extensive discussion in the first two chapters of this paper, I will end this introduction with a short overview on Novick's and Harlan's articles. Harlan published his book The Degradation of American History in 1997, as an attack on several currents in historical theory, especially postmodern theory, sociology and contextualism. Harlan advocates a return to history as a "form of moral deliberation".<sup>5</sup> In this paper I will discuss the introduction "It hath no Relish of Salvation in it" - American Historical Writing at the End of the Twentieth Century" of Harlan's book, which hardly refers to the book and can be read as an article. The introduction consists of two parts and a conclusion. Harlan starts by describing different developments in American historiography since the 1950's. He prizes the historians who wrote "broad-gauged, morally instructive histories"6 and sees the new directions coming up as a change for the worse. He discusses the left-wing historians and their fight against hidden power structures, the influence of postmodern theory on the existence of objective knowledge and the turn to sociological methodology. In the second part Harlan considers how

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Stefan Berger, "Comparative history," in: *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, eds. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore, 163 (London: Arnold, 2003) on different ways of using comparison in historical study.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Casey N. Blake in a review on Harlan's book in *The Journal of American History* vol 86, no. 1 (1999): 200-201.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), xv.

'the spiritual hunger' of man runs like a thread through history in literary, religious and philosophical texts.<sup>7</sup> This spiritual longing can never be answered by sociological methodology or the practical acceptance of partial knowledge instead of absolute truth. He states that the main reason to practice history should be a conversation with these texts to measure your own life against. In his conclusion he takes a stand against contextual reconstruction of historical texts and defends taking the texts "from the graveyard of dead contexts"<sup>8</sup> and letting them speak directly to the living.

On first sight Novick argues the complete opposite of Harlan, even though they agree upon the story of American historiography and highlight the same caesuras. But Novick, contrary to Harlan, agrees with most of the developments in American historiography after the 1960's. Novick argues that the main turning point was between the ethics of historical practice before the sixties that had truth finding and objectivity as main goal and after the sixties when 'truth' lost its meaning and the ethics of history were not consensual shared anymore. Novick does not refer to the morality issue that is so important to Harlan, but he does discuss the loss of grand stories and nationally shared ideologies. In his conclusion, or his statement, Novick speaks out for an ethics of honesty for historians, admitting that there might be no truth to reach in historical practice but that historical works should been seen as "contribution to collective self-understanding(s)".9 In addition he includes accuracy on straightforward factual statements, like 'the cat is on the mat'.<sup>10</sup> According to Novick factual accuracy is easy to maintain: "with minimal ingenuity you can construct a narrative of almost any imaginable shape, drawing whatever moral you wish, without getting facts wrong".<sup>11</sup> Although Novick clearly believes the claim for truth is lost for the professional community of historians,<sup>12</sup> he on the other hand holds factual accuracy for maintaining the difference between history and fiction.<sup>13</sup> With his idea that history should consists of stories that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> In this part, as in most of his introduction, Harlan's own use of language is very literary and even poetical.

<sup>8</sup> Harlan, xxxii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Peter Novick, "(The Death of) the Ethics of Historical Practice (and Why I Am Not in Mourning)," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 560 (1998): 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Cf. Lucian's historian sketched above: "intent, as the comic poet says, on calling a fig and a trough a trough".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Novick, 40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Ibid., 40. Novick adds, with a wink, "if only to save librarians a massive job of recataloguing".

form collective self-understanding Novick comes very close to Harlan's conclusion on the goal of history.

### Lucian of Samosata and the Second Sophistic

Lucian<sup>14</sup> was born in Samosata on the Euphrates, on the eastern edge of the Roman province Syria between AD 115 and 125.15 After his youthful 'conversion' to literature and the decision to lead his life to the ideal of *paideia*<sup>16</sup> as a Greek Sophist, he began to travel to different places as a public speaker. Allegedly he has travelled to Gaul and Italy, and after living in Antioch in close contact with the emperor Lucius Verus he moved to Athens. There he lived for a few years. At some point during his life he became a Roman citizen, probably even a Roman knight,<sup>17</sup> because in his later years he received a bureaucratic post in Egypt (from the emperor?) and he died in the late 180s or the early 190s. Lucian's landscape thus covers almost the entire Roman Empire. The only way we have knowledge of the life of Lucian is through his own works. This can be problematic because, as Jones says: "There is a danger of circularity, since much of the information is supplied by the author, and his works thus become the lens through which they themselves are viewed."18 The information is not necessarily reliable because it is conceivable that Lucian created a literary persona that fitted in the story of the wandering intellectual from the Second Sophistic.<sup>19</sup> In his works Lucian does not portray himself as a historian, but a sophist who make a living with words, speeches and declamations. A first and second century sophist was supposed to travel all around the Roman Empire giving speeches, and so Lucian allegedly did. The only work Lucian starts writing a traveller's tale and history, True Histories see below, he states explicit that he will only be telling lies.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Some parts of the first part are taken from a paper I have written in June 2010 for dr. Tacoma on Lucian's *Assembly of the Gods* and the political situation in Roman Athens.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> For a more comprehensive study on the live of Lucian cf. Barry Baldwin, *Studies in Lucian* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1973) and Christopher Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) esp. 6-23.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> *Paideia* is an untranslatable Greek concept that encompasses notions of education, cultural belonging and language proficiency (notably in Greek).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Jones, 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Jones. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Tim Whitmarsh, "'Greece is the World': exile and identity in the Second Sophistic" in *Being Greek under Rome*, ed. Simon Goldhill, 296-305 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Lucian, *True Histories*, 4. His *persona* a sophist is rather interesting in this light, as sophists of old have always been accused of using the power of words to make weaker arguments sound stronger or lies sound like the truth.

Lucian has written more than seventy works,<sup>21</sup> short prose texts on various topics. The range of topics is so wide that it is difficult to categorize his work and "any grouping is bound to appear artificial".<sup>22</sup> Some divisions, however, can be made in form and in subject. Most of his works are satiric dialogues, reflecting on different groups and developments in society, but he has also some fantastic narratives. An example for such a narrative is *True Histories* about a man who journeys to the moon, about interplanetary wars and a sea battle between people on whales and giants rowing islands. This work, in which Lucian presents himself as a kind of anti-historian, gives interesting openings to Lucian's discussing of truth and history.<sup>23</sup> In his satiric dialogues Lucian criticizes and parodies different philosophical and religious currents, like the Stoics, the Cynics and Christianity.<sup>24</sup> In some of these works he uses the Gods on the Olympus, a very Homeric setting, as a foil for the events on earth.<sup>25</sup> Besides dialogues Lucian has also written rhetorical show pieces and prologues to start his public lectures.<sup>26</sup>

Modern critics<sup>27</sup> sometimes have give Lucian little credit for inventiveness and originality, accusing him of flat imitation of Menippus, a Cynic satirist from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. This criticizes does no justice to the ingenuity of works by Lucian. His satires are not commonplaces filled with caricaturized characters but sharp observations of Lucian's own time. Lucian's reflection on the historical practice by contemporary historians is even the only extent work of this kind. We do have many historical works, but *How to Write History* is the only theoretical work on historiography to have survived from antiquity,<sup>28</sup> if we can consider it as such. Unfortunately it is thus impossible to examine the influences on *How to Write History* of other works historiography, but we can look at the influences of the broader cultural frame of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> The Loeb Classical Library lists 72 genuine works and 11 spurious works attributed to Lucian.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Jones, vi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Cf. Aristoula Georgiadou and David Larmour, *Lucian's Science Fiction Novel True Histories* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Among others On the Death of Peregrinus, Zeus Rants, On Funerals.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> E.g. Zeus Catechized and The Assembly of the Gods.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> For example *Dionysus*, *Herodotus or Aetion*, *Zeuxis*,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Most notably Rudolf Helm in Lucian und Menipp (Leipzig: Teubner, 1906).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> This in contrast with the many theoretical works from antiquity on other subject, for example, statecraft and the perfect body of laws (e.g. Plato, *Republic*; Cicero, *Republic*; Cicero, *On Laws*) or dream explanation (e.g. Artemidorus, *The interpretation of Dreams*).

The Second Sophistic is a term used for the Greek literary culture during the Roman Empire between AD 60 and AD 230.<sup>29</sup> Philostratus uses the term 'Second Sophistic' as a literary periodization for the first time in his work *The lives of the Sophists* in the 3rd century AD.<sup>30</sup> Although I use the term in this paper as a quite unproblematic periodization, I am aware of the debate on the question of how appropriate the term is. It is applied on many different writers who did not consider themselves to form a group. Goldhill, in his editorial introduction of the work *Being Greek under Rome – Cultural identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of the Empire*, seriously doubt whether 'Second Sophistic' can be maintained as term to classify writers of the first centuries AD.<sup>31</sup> He however also notes the advantages of this term: "it emphasizes the constant importance of rhetorical training and the rewards of rhetorical success in Empire society, and stresses the constant pull backwards to the glorious traditions of classical Greece."<sup>32</sup>

Both these points are important for our understanding of *How to write History*. As we will see Lucian uses Thucydides, Herodotus and Xenophon as *exempla*, models of good historical practice. Since they composed their works six hundred years before Lucian lived, this is a notable choice. This choice can be partly explained by the canonization of classical writers throughout antiquity. The classical writers formed an important part of the educational system, thus they remained well-known and well-read until late antiquity. A further explanation lies in the 'nostalgia' that was pervasive in the Greek world under the Roman Empire in the first centuries AD.<sup>33</sup> Having lost their autonomity, political power and influence to the Romans, the Greeks kept looking back to their 'Golden Age'. This reaction took place in all strands of culture and can be seen clearly in the Second Sophistic. Not only images and topics were taken and used from Classical Greece, but also the language. Writers composed works in Attic Greek, instead of their own koinè dialect.

Lucian stresses the importance of proper use of language as a virtue for historians. In this we can see the focus of the writers in the Second Sophistic on rhetoric and proper application of language. In the *paideia* 'ideal', proper education and proficiency in the Greek language is very important.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Brill's New Pauly -> Second Sophistic.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Philostratus, The Lives of the Sophists, 1 (praefatio).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Simon Goldhill, 'Introduction: setting an agenda', in *Being Greek under Rome*, ed. Simon Goldhill, 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> See for further discussion and bibliography Simon Goldhill's (ed.) excellent, *Being Greek under Rome*; Ray Laurence and Joanne Berry (eds.) *Cultural identity in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1998); Sue Alcock, 'Greece: a landscape of resistance?' in *Dialogues in Roman imperialism*, ed. Mattingly.

Especially for writers, like Lucian, who did not speak Greek as first language and thus had to learn later on in their life. Lucian possibly spoke Aramaic in his childhood, being a Syrian and 'barbarian in speech',<sup>34</sup> although it is also possible that his parents already spoke Greek and his remarks only refer to his Syrian accent of speaking Greek. But here we see also again how Lucian creates a literary *persona*, a provincial from the outskirts of the Roman Empire, with which he raises a lot of questions on identity and self-representation. Did Lucian see himself as a Syrian, a Greek writer, a Roman citizen and how does he want others to see him?<sup>35</sup> In *How to Write History* he once writes about the Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural, a very interesting fact, since many writers in the second sophistic act as if the Romans are not around.

Lucian was a versatile writer capable of composing different genres. *How to Write History*, while solitary in the antique genre of reflection on historians and the historical practice, can be linked with some other works form Lucian's oeuvre. The critical and mocking tone in the discussion of the historians reminds of many satirical works Lucian wrote. His preoccupation in *How to Write History* with the truth in historical accounts is shared with *True Histories*, persiflaging on the reliability of historical narratives.<sup>36</sup> Although we cannot establish direct literary predecessors or inspiration for *How to Write History*, the work can be placed in the literary and cultural discourse of its time. As we will see in the next part the main influence of the Second Sophistic can be seen in the reverence of the classical historians over Lucian's contemporaries and the constant stress on the importance of proper language use.

### How to Write History?

*How to Write History* is one of the longer works of Lucian. It is composed as a letter to a friend, Philo, of whom we know nothing. We are thus not sure if this letter is written to a real person or that it was a literary construct.<sup>37</sup> Contrary to other literary letters, like the ones by Cicero, Pliny and Seneca,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Cf. Double Indictment 14, 27; Uncultured Man 4, 19; Fisherman 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Lucian plays with these questions in his work On the Syrian Goddess, in which he represents himself at the same time bemused but superior-feeling tourist visiting a local cult (in the line of Herodotus) and a religious *insider* who had participated in the cult. See for more discussion on this topic: Jaś Elsner, 'Describing Self in the language of the Other: Pseudo(?) Lucian at the temple of Herapolis', in *Being Greek under Rome*, ed. Simon Goldhill, 123-153 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Georgiadou and Larmour, Lucian's Science Fiction Novel True Histories, 22 ff.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> These two options do not necessarily exclude each other. Lucian could have modelled his letter after the letters of Seneca and Cicero. These instructing letters are a literary genre but at the same time sent to real people.

the text does not have an opening phrase and close like a proper letter,<sup>38</sup> which might be an indication that the text was only modelled to the genre of the literary letter. We have other works of Lucian written as a letter, like the work *Alexander or the false prophet* and the *Peregrinus*. The main goal of these letters is ridiculing an adversary of Lucian and the letters are full of shared jokes and implied common understanding, not unlike *How to write history*, but on the other hand Lucian states in *How to write history* that he wants to create something other historians could use and benefit from.<sup>39</sup> It was thus clearly aimed at a wider audience and not only to the recipient.

The work opens with a fantastic story about the people from Abdera,<sup>40</sup> who, when they all fell ill of a fever, started to recite Euripides' *Andromeda*, because they were infected with this fever in the theatre listening to the *Andromeda* being preformed. Just like this, Lucian states, the Parthian wars<sup>41</sup> have inspired everybody to feverishly write histories.<sup>42</sup> The Parthian war of the Roman emperor Lucius Verus was probably just finished when Lucian wrote his work.<sup>43</sup> After this anecdote Lucian states his purpose of writing this text:

παραίνεσιν δέ τινα μικράν καὶ ὑποθήκαὶ ταὐταὶ ὀλίγαὶ ὑποθήσομαι τοι'ἱ συγγράφουσιν [...] τὸ δὲ οἶσθά που καὶ αὐτόἱ, ὦ ἑται'ρε, ὡἱ οὐ των εὐμεταχειρίστων οὐδὲ ῥαθύμωἱ συντεθηναι δυναμένων του'τ' ἐστίν, ἀλλ', εἴ τι ἐν λόγοιἱ καὶ ἄλλο, πολλη'ἱ τη'ἱ φροντίδοἱ δεόμενον, ἤν τιἱ, ὡἱ ὁ Θουκυδίδηἱ φησίν, ἐἱ ἀεὶ κτη'μα συντιθείη.

In fact, I shall offer a little advice and these few precepts to historians, [...]. As to that, I am sure you know as well as I do, my dear friend, that history is not one of those things that can be put in hand without effort and can be put together lazily,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Like Seneca's letters: *Seneca Lucilio suo salutem* (Seneca greets his Lucilius) and *vale* (goodbye).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Lucian, *How to Write History*, 4-6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> A city in the south of Thrace, on the coast of the Aegean Sea.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> The Parthian wars fought by the Romans with their neighbours, the Parthian Empire. It lasted from 54 BC, when Lucius invaded Pathia, until 224 AD, when the Parthian empire was conquered by the Sassanids (then they started to fight the Romans). The Parthian war here referred to took place 162-165 AD against Vologesus III, king of Parthia, about the rule of Armenia and Syria.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Lucian, How to Write History, 2.5-13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> The dating of Lucian's work is very difficult and speculative, but the main indication to place this work in the middle of 166 that there is no reference to the devastating plague that Lucius Verus' troops brought back from the east. See further Jones, 60.

but is something which needs, if anything does in literature, a great deal of thought if it is to be, what Thucydides calls "a possession for evermore".

Excluding the introduction (paragraph 1-5), the text can be divided in two main parts. In the first part (6-33) Lucian discusses all pitfalls that must be avoided and gives examples of flaws made by historians writing on the Parthian wars. He starts with general remarks of the most important vices of a historian (6-14): including too much flattery, not telling the truth and applying the wrong language, too poetical or too vulgar. Then he proceeds (14-33) with criticizing eleven different historians, whose work he has heard in public declamations.<sup>44</sup> Most often he does not name these, making it for the audience to deduce whom he is referring to. After quoting or describing a passage from one of the historians, Lucian discusses the problem with this passage and analyses the flaws.

The second part (33-63) describes the qualities a historian must have to be a good historian and gives advice on text structures and languages use. This part contains no passages from contemporary historians but only general advice on the attitude a historian, his language and the importance of factual and true statements. In this part Lucian uses three classical historians as exem*pla* of the good practices he advocates, Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon. Herodotus, 'the father of history',<sup>45</sup> lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, and wrote the Histories, the first prose work from Greece, on the Greek-Persian wars and the histories of the countries that participated in it. Thucydides of Athens also lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and was the chronicler of the Peloponnesian war.<sup>46</sup> He was, for some time during the war, a general in the Athenian army until he was banished for a failed military operation. He thus had first hand experience how the war was fought.<sup>47</sup> Xenophon also was from Athens, but fought first for Cyrus from Persia and later for Sparta. His works, the Anabasis and the Hellenika,48 show Xenophon's knowledge of military matters. Criticizing contemporary historians and using Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon, living

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Historical works were often not read silently but were performed by the authors and listened to by an audience. Lucian refers several times to this practice in his work.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Cicero, *on Laws*, 1,1,5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> A war between Athens and Sparta, and allied states on both sides, from 431 until 404.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> This point is very important to Lucian. In his opinion a student wanting to write history should have "the mind of a soldier [...] and a knowledge of generalship and he should have been at some time in a camp and have seen soldiers drilling."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> The *Anabasis* deals with the march of the Greek soldiers fighting for Cyrus through the Persian heartland after their leaders were killed and the *Hellenika* picks up the story of the Peloponnesian war from where Thucydides left it.

and working 600 years before Lucian, as *exempla*, is very much congruent with the cultural and literary tendencies in the second century of reaching back to the past while scorning the present.<sup>49</sup>

This scorn is clearly visible in Lucian treatise of the contemporary historians. Some come of relatively well, but some are completely ridiculed. He starts with some general remarks on "what the writer if history has to avoid, from what things he must in particular be free".50 The first and most important vice he names is flattery and praising people too lavishly, especially when this praise threatens the truth-value of his report. Lucian also warns against using poetic language, words and metaphors in historical works. If applied in moderation and at proper places, poetical language can adorn a work of history, but it must not be overdone, since beauty is not the main goal in writing history. The last general remark that Lucian makes somewhat later on, is the balance between introduction and content. All these general statements return in the discussion of historians, while Lucian also introduces new flaws. Two historians are specifically blamed for their flattery.<sup>51</sup> Two others are scorned for the unbalance between their introduction and their work, while Lucian also mocks the two historians who neglect the balance between individual scenes and lose themselves in longwinded descriptions.<sup>52</sup> That the proper use of language is an important to Lucian is shown by the many references he makes to this topic. Criticizing word choice recurs by five different historians, either for mixing two languages (e.g. Greek and Latin), two dialects or mixing the High and Low registers of a language, poetical words with vulgar marketplace words. The two other pitfalls a historian should avoid, according to Lucian, are slavish imitating Herodotus and Thucydides, and copying large parts of their work and last but not least, not telling the truth, whether because of undeserved flattering, making up interesting stories or insufficient knowledge of the subject.

Lucian regards the truth as the most important matter for a historian, as he states a couple of times throughout this work: "History cannot admit a lie, even a tiny one [...]"; "History has one task and one end - what is useful -, and that comes from the truth alone"; "[...] and only to Truth must sacrifice be made. When a man is going to write history, everything else he must ignore".<sup>53</sup> Lucian thinks that the truth is best served by a historian who

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> See below for a further discussion on the characteristics and influence of the Second Sophistic in the first and second century AD.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Lucian, *How to Write History*, 6.3-4. "φέρε πρωτα εἴπωμεν ἄτινα φευκτέον τω' ἱστορίαν συγ-γράφοντι καὶ ὦν μάλιστα καθαρευτέον"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Lucian, *How to Write History*, 14; 17.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 16; 30 and 20-21; 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Ibid., 7; 9; 40. "ή δὲ οὐκ ἄν τι ψευδοί ἐμπεσὸν ή ἱστορία, οὐδὲ ἀκαριαιον ἀνάσχοιτο"; "ἐν γὰρ ἔργον ἱστορίαι καὶ τέλοι, τὸ χρήσιμον, ὅπερ ἐκ του<sup>1</sup>

is a free man, and states the facts as they are without distorting them. A free man is to Lucian a man who can distance himself from allegiances he holds - city, country or emperor - and write an unbiased and balanced account of the events. Lucian gives some short pieces of advice on how to collect and arrange the facts and how to weight the evidence, but this very relevant aspect of historical practice does not have his main interest.<sup>54</sup> He does pay attention to practical matters of ordering and constructing a historical work and uses Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon several times as example for a perfect introduction or smooth transitions. Lucian finishes with a point that has been recurring in his argument that history must be written for posterity and not for contemporaries. When doing this, the historian will not need to revert to flattery for praise and he will focus on the most important parts of the story.

As we have seen Lucian illustrates the vices of historical practice by using contemporary historians, while the classical historians exemplify the virtues. How this nostalgia fits in the literary discourse of Lucian's time we have already seen above. According to Lucian, the most important virtues for a historian are writing truthful, to abstain from coaxing and bias, and proper language use. It is interesting that Lucian pictures his 'ideal' historian as a free man, and a man being in his written work like a stranger, a man with no country and subject to no king. Lucian seems to acknowledge that it is hard to reach perfect objectivity and that in practice historians will always be influenced by his bonds to a city, a people or sovereign. The importance of language choice to Lucian is made clear by the numerous remarks on the subject and the distinction between different registers he makes. He not only criticizes the mixing of different languages and of (Greek) dialects, but also of the high and low variety of a language. As we have seen in the next chapter this language consciousness is characteristic of the literature and larger cultural currents in the second century AD.

# **Comparison**

We have seen the contents of Lucian's work and its place in the literary discourse. In this chapter the two modern theoretical treatises, of Novick and Harlan, will act as a foil to see the differences in the ideas on the ethics

ἀληθουί μόνου συνάγεται."; "Έν γάρ, ὡἰ ἔφην, τουτο ἴδιον ἱστορίαἰ, καὶ μόνη θυτέον τη ἀληθεία, εἴ τιὶ ἱστορίαν γράψων ἴοι, των δὲ ἄλλων ἁπάντων ἀμελητέον αὐτω".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Chistopher Ligota, "Lucian on the writing of history", in Lucian of Samosata Vivus and Redivivus, eds. Christopher Ligota and Letizia Panizza, 55 (London: The Warburg Institute, 2007).

of historical practice and in the use of a theoretical framework. When these three treatises are compared a few things are striking, for example the differences in their ideas on the writing of history and on historiography. The first difference is obvious, namely the form of the treatise. Lucian's treatise is (or is modelled to) a letter to a friend, not a publication for a scholarly public. This creates a setting 'among friends' in which anything can be said.<sup>55</sup> Novick and Harlan both wrote for a larger public in published media. But while Novick's treatise is an article that stands on itself. Harlan's discussed text is only an introduction, albeit a freestanding one. Also the tone of the texts differs: Lucian and Novick write both from a personal viewpoint and integrate their opinion openly in the text. They both use the pronouns I and me in their arguments. Harlan almost always uses the first person plural in his arguments,<sup>56</sup> creating the feeling that we historians have a lot in common and all think the same about the developments in history. He does not place himself or his own experiences on the foreground,<sup>57</sup> although he does makes clear his own opinion.

Lucian writes about and for contemporary historians who all write on contemporary events and issues. The historians he writes about are reporters and analysers of a war that is still in progress while they are writing. This gives their work a great social relevance and urgency. Also the classical historians, whom Lucian used as example, wrote about the wars in their own time.<sup>58</sup> For the historians Novick and Harlan discuss, this is not the case. Not only do they write on many different topics, contemporary or further in the past, some also wrote their book long before the Novick's article and Harlan's book. Harlan and Novick both have a clear time frame within their articles, marking changes in the practice of history in time. For both, especially for Novick, American history has a clear beginning, approximately 1880, and this beginning forms the starting position for their argument.<sup>59</sup> Their articles contain a narrative of American historiography, while Lucian, at the first glance, appears not to have such a clear narrative of development and degradation. He seems to write guidelines for historians on good history writing, exemplify-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Although, as we have seen, Lucian does aim for a larger public of want-to-be historians.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> The thing he laments to be lost in the new generation of historical narratives.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> However, when he starts describing the demons haunting at three o'clock in the morning, one cannot help but to get the feeling Harlan has met these demons personally.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> In Greek the verb *historein* means doing research not necessarily about the past.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Harlan does reach back in the past and uses examples of historians, writers and (religious inspired) philosophers who lived centuries – or even millennia – ago, but his main division is between 1880-1960 and 1960-present. Harlan incorporates these examples mainly to give weight to the kind of history writing he advocates, thus placing it in a long tradition.

ing his arguments with the bad and good historians he encounters. However, Lucian uses only classical writers as examples of 'good' historians and contemporary writers as examples of 'bad' ones, thus integrating a time frame in his 'guide' for historians by implying a degradation narrative from 5<sup>th</sup> century BC until 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.

Lucian's text, Harlan's introduction and the article of Novick all consider the goal of writing history and the ethics of the historical practice, which includes the correct behaviour of historians. Harlan does this while attacking the changes in the goal of American historiography in the last decades. Novick also describes these changes and then draws his own conclusion on what he would like the function of history to be. Lucian is more focussed on discussing good and bad practices for historians, but between the lines his view on the goal of writing history can be discerned. All three works are at the same time descriptive and prescriptive. According to Lucian objective of writing history should be preserving history for posterity, as is shown by his quote from Thucydides in his opening statement. Thucydides states his reason for writing on the Peloponnesian War: the deeds in it were grand and worth remembering. So, remembrance of past deeds and 'eternal' value is important for Lucian and linked to the most important thing for the *practice* of history: the Truth.<sup>60</sup> By truth Lucian understands factual accuracy as well as objectivity in reporting these facts. By writing truthful and objective a historian can assure his work will have value that transcends his own time. Novick, in the end, considers the objective for historians to be reflecting on human life and nature and he wants to introduce a professional code of honesty as new basis of historical ethics. At the end of the article he writes a historian's creed of honesty: "What I am doing is exploring and thinking about the past with as much energy and intelligence as I can muster and then making up interesting, provocative, even edifying stories about it as contributions to collective selfunderstandings".<sup>61</sup> He admits that it might be a utopian hope that this will ever be a consensual statement on the function of history and that he will settle for factual accuracy, the one thing that Novick conceives as being a consensual point in the practice of history. Harlan thinks our main responsibility as historians, and indeed as human beings, is to the make sure the works of people in the past are kept alive in our time. As he writes in his last paragraph, Harlan thinks that the issue of objective truth in history does not need further defence or attention since "the border that separates history from fiction is not going to disappear",62 the attempts of postmodernism notwithstanding. One could say that since Lucian 'has missed' postmodernism, the three treatises are incom-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> See above for quotes on the importance of truth.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Novick, 39.

<sup>62</sup> Harlan, xxxiii.

patible. It is interesting to see that although 'factual truth' and objectivity are, as Kenneth Cmiel says,<sup>63</sup> dethroned long after Lucian, are still valued greatly in historical practice. The idea that truth is the main objective of history, how-ever, has been abandoned.

#### Conclusion

The main goal of this paper is to explore the question to what extent can Lucian's How to Write History be seen as a theoretical treatise on the ethics of a historian? To answer this question I have divided my research into three parts, the contents of the text, the literary discourse of the work and the comparison with two modern theoretical treatises. In the first part work is placed within the whole oeuvre of Lucian, and linked to several works he has written, because of the satiric note in the work or the topic of plausibility of historical narratives. *How to Write History* is also linked to the larger literary currents of the first centuries AD, especially by the emphasis on the glorious past and the contempt of the present. In part two Lucian's enumerations of good and bad historical practice are discussed, together with the historians that provide examples of these practices. The virtues for a historian are writing the truth, avoiding flattery and bias, and choosing the right language, the vices are their opposites. In the last Chapter Lucian's work is discussed by means of a comparison between How to Write History and two modern articles, by Peter Novick and David Harlan. Although they all three emphasize a different main goal of history, they do agree on many things in the discussion on the ethics of historical practice. As we have already seen before, factual accuracy is very important for all three of them, even for Peter Novick, who rejects truth as a goal for historians. How a good historian should behave, is not that different for Lucian of Samosata, Peter Novick and David Harlan.

My conclusion is that, in a way, *How to Write History* can be seen as a theoretical treatise on the ethics of historical practice. Lucian might not lose himself in a complex theoretical framework but he does sketch what he deems the main objective of history and writes clearly on the ethics of historians. By comparison with modern-day historians it becomes clear that with these accounts not too much has changed. Maybe the biggest change is that the focus on proper language use is lessened. On the other hand, however, there are some problems with taking this discussion on the ethics of historical practice at face value. As we have seen, *How to Write History* can also be seen as a literary product of its time, infused with nostalgic reverence of the three great classical historians, seeing everything that comes from them in a good light. It

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Kenneth Cmiel, "After Objectivity: What comes Next in history?," *American Literary Journal* 2 (1990): 170 (non vidi).

might be this nostalgia that makes Lucian speaking so contemptuously of his contemporary historians, not their qualities as historians. It is this nostalgia that makes all present tense and the past perfect.

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#### Резиме

Маријн Висер

# "Давно прошло и садашње време" Поређење трију расправа о етици историографске праксе

**Кључне речи:** историографија, Друга софистика, Луцијан из Самосате, Питер Новик, Дејвид Харлан

Циљ овог рада је да истражи однос између трију различитих текстова који се тичу писања историје. Први текст је полемичко дело *Како писати историју*, написан од стране Луцијана из Самосате у другом веку н.е, који се бави врлинама и пороцима историчара. Друга два текста су теоретска разматрања етике историографске праксе са краја двадесетог века. По разматрању садржаја и књижевног контекста *Како писати историју*, биће изведен закључак о природи дела путем поређења са друга два текста. Може ли се *Како писати историју* сматрати теоријским текстом о етици историографске праксе или сатиричком критиком без икаквог теоријског утемељења? У овом ћу раду тврдити да је *Како писати историју* заиста теоријски текст о писању историје, те да, штавише, нема толико много разлика између трију текстова, колико се на први поглед може учинити.