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CONVERSATION



The ethics of narrative: a readers' dialogue

Ewa Domańska ^a, Robert Doran ^b, Jakub Muchowski ^c,
Herman Paul ^d, Kalle Pihlainen ^e and Miguel Valderrama ^f

^aDepartment of History, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland; ^bDepartment of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY, USA; ^cDepartment of History, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland; ^dInstitute for History, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands; ^eDepartment of Philosophy, University of Turku, Turku, Finland; ^fDepartment of Philosophy, Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación (UMCE), Santiago, Chile

ABSTRACT

This article is a collaborative commentary on the first volume of a two-part anthology of works by Hayden White, *The Ethics of Narrative*, edited by Robert Doran. Informed by the collection and inspired by the co-authors, in this paper we discuss White's writing. Herman Paul compares White's constructivism with that of Berger and Luckmann, and discusses the extent to which the tools of historical narrative criticism developed by White are expeditious in analyzing stories about the climate crisis. Kalle Pihlainen captures White's writing in a three-stage process of emancipatory politics of history, to further reconfigure it using the concept of fidelity. Jakub Muchowski writes about the relationship between the titular ethics and politics, asking to what extent White regarded them as separate spheres of practice, and whether in choosing the former White was apolitical. Ewa Domańska considers how White's critical approach to history might help to explore possibilities of bridging Indigenous and Western approaches to the past as well as reflects on White's attitude toward metaphysics. Finally, Miguel Valderrama considers the ways in which White uses the concept of event. The exchange closes with Robert Doran's response to all the commentaries.

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Introduction

The following paper is a multi-author commentary on the first volume of a two-part anthology of works by Hayden White, *The Ethics of History*, edited by Robert Doran. This rich assemblage of writings, spanning the years 1998–2017 complements the collection published by Doran in 2010, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1953–2007*

CONTACT Jakub Muchowski ✉ jakub.muchowski@uj.edu.pl  Department of History, Jagiellonian University, Golebia 13, 31-007 Kraków, Kraków, Poland

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(White and Doran 2010a). Instead of individual reviews, we decided to conduct a dialogue about the book. This took place in two rounds (Miguel Valderrama joined in the second) and closed with a commentary by the volume's editor. By exchanging comments about the book, we were able to stimulate each other for further comments. We are under no illusions that we have achieved the effect of a shared reading or even a meeting of a small book club operating under the banner of a theory of history, but we feel that the final outcome in the end resembles a record of the seminar's work.

Our remarks concentrated on issues that have come up before in discussions of White's work. We evoked the ideological content of historical narrative, alternative approaches to historical representation, the anticipation and fulfillment model, historical injustice, and dispositions of historical writing with regard to emancipational endeavours, as well as maintaining social reality. With new writings by White at hand we reconsidered how his machinery of historical narrative criticism works, its potential (e.g. in deconstructing climate change narratives) and its limitations (some ask about its iconoclastic character, others wonder about its metaphysical underpinnings). For the reading of the collection, in addition to White's other works that have long circulated, we also used extra readings, including Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, and books by Vine Deloria Jr. and Alain Badiou. We also situate it within various interpretive frameworks (e.g. constructivism, post-secularism, Indigenous knowledges) and concepts (event, fidelity, the opposition of politics vs. ethics).

Herman Paul: The social construction of history

Why did Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), despite its landmark impact on fields across the humanities and social sciences, never resonate much among historians and historical theorists (Knoblauch and Wilke 2016, 51–69)? One answer is that the historical profession did not need Berger and Luckmann to be told that traditions can be invented or that nation states resort to myths to create symbolic identities for their peoples. The field had its own Bergers and Luckmanns, for instance in the person of Hayden White.

Already in 'The Burden of History', published in the same year as *The Social Construction of Reality*, White hammered home the point that historical facts are 'constructed' rather than found, that plots are 'constructed', and that all of these constructions are essentially provisional (White 1966, 127, 128, 134). In later publications, the socio-political significance of these constructions moved to the center of attention. In his 1987 volume *The Content*

of the Form, White argued that historical discourse often serves as a political instrument for 'dominant social groups' who seek to fortify the 'cultural edifice of a society' with 'authoritative myths' (White 1987a, x). This analysis is more than a little reminiscent of *The Social Construction of Reality*. Although White only occasionally used the phrase 'social construction' (e.g. White 1973, 224), he would have agreed with Berger and Luckmann that historical visions are social constructions of reality that serve as 'conceptual machineries' for legitimizing positions of power (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 100–101).

To what extent White kept preoccupied with issues of social construction, even in some of the papers he wrote in old age, is apparent from Robert Doran's lovingly edited collection of essays, *The Ethics of Narrative*. In these late articles and conference talks, we find White discussing not only historians' constructions of the past but also, more broadly, the social construction of 'Europe', the 'West', 'humanity', 'tradition', and 'civilization' – all between inverted commas to stress their artificial character. Although there are moments when White seems to find the word construction somewhat too mechanistic – 'poetic imagination' and 'prefigurative act' are more typically Whitean terms – it has the advantage of highlighting this artificiality. As White explains in a previously unpublished lecture, 'construction' for him is shorthand for the projection of 'a false or fictive coherency . . . onto both the present and the past and, beyond that, on the relationship presumed to link past to present' (27).

Although false and fictive are not the same, White's keenness to expose historical narratives as constructions rests on the conviction that fictions are false, in the sense of spreading false consciousness, to the extent that they hide their ideological agendas and present themselves as truths beyond dispute. In this volume just as in earlier publications, White rejects such indoctrination in the name of individual freedom. Commenting on Baldassare Castiglione, he writes with apparent approval that identity is 'a construction – a product of will and wit and style (*sprezzatura*), variable at the behest of chance and fortune, infinitely changeable and subject to no role of either authenticity or consistency' (57). The word 'will' is worth underlining here, as one of White's dearest beliefs is that human beings can reject the historical constructions imposed upon them by what *Metahistory* called 'an act of will' or 'an act of consciousness which destroys the socially provided belief in the legitimacy of the current social establishment' (White 1973, 24). Robert Doran is right to highlight this volitional dimension of White's thought in his introduction to the volume (xxxiv). If White adopts an iconoclast stance, inviting his readers to join him in unmasking social constructions of history, he does so to

encourage them to choose a past for themselves rather than have one chosen for them.

At this point, the analogy between White and *The Social Construction of Reality* reaches its limits. Although Berger in his 1961 book, *The Precarious Vision*, had shown himself an eager iconoclast, arguing like White that social fictions threaten freedom, authenticity, and responsibility (Berger 1961, 85–100), the tone of Berger and Luckmann's 1966 sequel is different. 'The task of the sociology of knowledge', we read, 'is not to be the debunking or uncovering of socially produced distortions, but the systematic study of the social conditions of knowledge as such' (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 11). Instead of challenging social constructions, Berger and Luckmann try to understand their working and effects. Arguably, among other reasons, this is because the two sociologists had come to see that *all* visions of reality, the oppositional, unorthodox, and non-hegemonic included, need confirmation from others, normative legitimation, and practices of socialization to maintain themselves over against other ones, thereby inevitably developing new forms of indoctrination, even if at smaller scales.

One may speculate how White would have responded to this line of reasoning. Would he have agreed that his 'liberation historiography', as I have dubbed his project (Paul 2011, 35–56; see also Domańska 2015), privileged moments of unmasking, exposing, and uncovering over what Berger and Luckmann call 'reality maintenance', simply because fighting the hegemony of powerful historical fictions was for him a more urgent task than the development of sustainable alternatives? Or would he have rejected Berger and Luckmann's argument as yet another dangerous construction of reality – a 'sociologism' that defines the real in such a way as to sacrifice individual liberty to social necessities?

Kalle Pihlainen: Three steps to liberation in *The Ethics of Narrative*

Let me begin by noting that this is an exceedingly rich and varied volume, the reading of which has further deepened my regard for the breadth of Hayden White's intellectual interests. Although many of the essays can be found individually, seeing them together is inspiring. Sadly, this impressive range also meant that difficult choices had to be made with respect to what to foreground here. For this brief intervention, I decided to limit myself to two thematically and argumentatively closely related chapters¹: Chapter 5, 'Figura and Historical Subalternation' (2000: 84–94), and Chapter 11, 'The Metaphysics of Western Historiography: Cosmos,

Chaos, and Sequence in Historiological Representation' (2004, 151–164). Given my own theoretical agenda, which I will spell out below and which very much shapes my general reading of White, these texts best introduce what I take to be the arguments most deserving of additional, detailed attention.

To me, these chapters are remarkable in White's oeuvre, offering explanations that are relatively rare in his other work. Chapter 5, as per its title, directly tackles the question of historical marginalization as well as the way in which that might be alleviated through alternative representational approaches. Importantly, here, in this essay, these alternatives are potentially still available for disciplinary historians, as opposed to his assigning them more exclusively to fiction in *The Practical Past* (2014). While such political efforts align with the overall arguments of much of his other work, I read this chapter as, additionally, usefully suggesting three steps by which we may, theoretically too, arrive at an emancipatory conclusion. Chapter 11, in turn, tackles the 'desire' for 'historicality' head-on. In my view, this is White at his most precise and philosophically sensitive and the chapter constitutes essential reading for anyone wishing to scrutinize his core claims.

The admiration expressed above does not mean to say that these particular essays (or indeed all others in the collection) are unproblematic. Indeed, it is clear why they are not, as developed here, among the ones White included in his own essay collections. Chapter 5, 'Figura and Historical Subalternation', for instance, while helpful and illuminating, particularly regarding some aspects of 'The Modernist Event' and 'Auerbach's Literary History' in *Figural Realism* (1999), is somewhat disappointing in the lack of transitions between key arguments² and only presents his take on Walter Benjamin in skeletal form. Remembering that the chapter is a conference paper can assuage some of the frustration, however, and certainly helps focus instead on how it can enrich and enhance understanding of White's overall thinking.

The unfinished and at times fragmentary nature of many of the essays should thus not be taken as a reason to devalue them. All texts in the collection serve to remind what a brilliant essayist White was, and taking the time to read and reread more convoluted sections helps to better grasp fundamental issues not always obvious in his other work. This is certainly the case for the way he perceives today once-again-timely ideas of 'historicization' and 'historicity', for example. While these terms often seem insufficiently elaborated, helpful definitions can be found in these chapters: historicizing involves a distancing, a perspectivization and

a valuing with respect to its conceivability specifically ‘as an anticipation (a figure) of a later event or a fulfillment of an earlier event’ (85, cf. 160) as well as the ‘capacity – as a function of posteriority alone – to comprehend anything earlier as being either an anticipation of itself [...], or as not being in this line of descent and therefore being subject to an understanding more “anthropological” than “historical” in nature’ (86, cf. 161–162). As a result of the variety of topics and style in the essays – as well as of their each marking different moments in the development of White’s thinking – such small but brilliant pearls are readily discoverable in every chapter of the book.

The fact that the above is how White conceives of the historical operation – of the production of specifically *historical* knowledge – should come as no surprise, and it ties in with the first of the three steps that I take to constitute the core of the argument for any politics of history. Viewing history writing as an appropriation relies on the underdetermining nature of knowledge of the past. That is, while there is an irreducible epistemic component to history, available information about the past is severely limited (not to mention predominantly arbitrary); hence all interpretations based on such ‘remainders’ (93) are fundamentally lacking. Thus – as White has it – history ‘is motivated by a desire to discover form in a past which, by the clutter of remains left to us, we know to have once existed but which now presents itself as ruins and clutter’ (151), ‘a *desire* for coherency in response to anxieties generated by the apprehension of the past as “blooming, buzzing confusion”’ (154). But crucially: although the underlying claim that history ultimately always fails in the epistemic is by far the most debated point in connection with White’s views of history, that is only a first, preparatory stage.

So, while no account can ever be definitive simply for this epistemic lack alone, there is a next step to consider: stemming from both underdetermination and the will to historicize, an ‘ideological’ component is inevitably introduced (or, as for White elsewhere, a ‘moral’ and ‘aesthetic’ component). This is because the relationships posited are ‘determined by the narrator’s need to show figural aptness rather than logical implication or entailment’ (88, cf. 163) – both implication and entailment being impossible in the face of underdetermination, it should be remembered. Indeed, even if we had access to *all* possible information, meaning is a product of historicization and narrativization, of *valuation*, never something somehow ‘discoverable’ in evidence. Or, as White explains this in the chapters discussed: ‘it is only as enfigured that historical reality can take on an aspect of a meaning at once revealed and concealed by the

forms that events seem to display to perception as told or written about' (89 and 163–164). Consequently, if we view historicization as retroactive meaning-making appealing to a *faux* dynamic of anticipation and later fulfillment, it becomes clear that while this fulfillment inevitably fails in the epistemic sense it simultaneously *always* 'succeeds' within this logic of history making.

All this then introduces a clearly political and practical challenge: the inexorable appropriation effected by historicization equates to a domestication of the past, an imposition of closure and meaning that we would do well to avoid. In line with this realization, the third, expressly ethical, step of the argument pushes history toward emancipation, which can only be realized through 'antinarrative' (91) representational form. This implies a turn to fragmentary and episodic representations, the possibilities White finds in Benjamin here. Centrally, whatever the opportune textual strategy for this, White appears resolved that since we can never achieve faithful representations we should dispense with that conceit and, by doing so, ultimately eschew the practice of history as 'the oppression of the weaker sectors of society by the stronger' (91).

Jakub Muchowski: Politics and ethics of narrative

The title of the volume and the introductions by Judith Butler and Robert Doran suggest that White's collected papers should be read as being about ethics, or more specifically, addressing the relationship between ethics and historical writing. In doing so, they follow the well-established and well-argued route of interpreting White's writing, paved since the 1980s by Hans Kellner (Kellner 1989).³ In my commentary, I would like to draw attention to another concept linking the collected papers: politics. It seems to me an important component of these writings, even if one less articulated than ethics and occupying a complex position.

White frequently came back to the question of political identities and the conflicts between a legitimacy-seeking state or economic power and the social changes taking place. He confronted patriotism, for example, with the recognition that the model of the patriarchal family, on which this form of loyalty to the state or nation was based, had succumbed to competition from alternative forms of life (chapter one). In several articles, he referred to the process of building a European identity, and exposing the constructivist nature of this practice and the difficulties that this undertaking might have encountered, given that the last few hundred

years of European history have been a succession of conquests and ruthless exploitation of the rest of the world (chapters three and eight). At the same time, in one of the papers he showed the usefulness of a European identity in coping with more recent disasters – the story of the inadequate Europeanisation of southern Italian society and institutions gave meaning to the tragic landslide in Sarno in 1998 (chapter four).

How does politics work in these articles? It is first and foremost a driving force and an important component of narratives or imaginaries representing a regulated social order, subject to change or reproduction, populated by groups with more or less defined identities. The body of material for their construction and, at the same time, authority is sought, among other sources, in historical writing. Politics navigates different discourses, including historical discourse, and uses various rhetorical devices to sustain the audience's engagement with the manufactured representation of the political order at the level it desires.

I find further indications of the position of politics in White's thinking in chapter four,⁴ in which he addressed the relationship between ethics and politics, not least by including it in a broader constellation with rhetoric and history. White made a few points here distinguishing politics from ethics, but in subsequent accounts of the relationship between the two and other concepts, ethics and politics came closer together. He pointed to two useful distinctions between politics and ethics operating in the tradition of Western thought: in one, ethics was concerned with determining what actions were good (and forbidden) and politics with what actions were possible (and impossible); in the other, he suggested that the discourse of ethics was about "obligation" or "binding" and that of politics 'about discerning, defining, and utilizing the principles informing life in the "polis"'. He also noted that historical writing often narrativized their relationship precisely as a conflict between the forbidden and the possible.

At the same time, White suggested that politics and ethics have a similar relationship with history. Historical discourse itself – this claim has long recurred in his papers – avoids taking ethical or political positions in an effort to fit in with what it regarded as the model of science. At the same time, this discourse, when it takes up ethical or political issues, relativizes them by situating in a particular historical context and reducing them to a single circumstance. As a result, historical writing strips any political or ethical idea of universality. However, this does not mean that history is useless for political and ethical practice. According to White, singular and situated historical knowledge is useful

for situational politics and ethics. It can be productive in the moment of political or ethical decision-making, when one wonders, 'What ought I to do?', 'What can I do?' White did not explain here, however, how exactly historical knowledge can be used in such circumstances, but a preliminary sketch of such a practice was suggested by his discussion of Walter Benjamin's dialectical image or tactic of citation in chapter five (and to some extent chapter ten) of this volume.

The subsequent passages of the article make it difficult to distinguish between ethics and politics. White referred to both in a complex way: he believed that they were important elements of historical writing, but at the same time he was suspicious of them and saw them as a threat. He held that historical writing only made sense if it responded to our existential ethical needs and addressed the important political issues of the present, but at the same time he debunked narratives that carried ethical and political messages.

White also adopted a suspicious attitude towards politics outside the field of historical writing, in statements that give the impression of being more personal. In the conclusion of the article, he wrote that he was primarily interested in ethics, which he further emphasized when he downplayed the importance of politics in the following words: 'As for politics, I am interested only in...'. However, he devoted most of this section of the paper to the latter by presenting a modest vision of the political order he looks forward to: 'a viable democratic community, [...] a state that will serve the interests of fairness for its citizens and practice a policy of respect and open-mindedness vis-à-vis other kinds of communities, and serve as referee to assure fair practices among the various groups that make up what is called civil society and provide safeguards for the least privileged of its members'. The next words suggest that this is a fragile political order, as it is threatened by several powerful forces enumerated by White: religion, totalitarianism and corporate capitalism.

The closing remarks of the paper likewise suggest that ethics and politics occupy different positions in White's thinking. White was concerned with ethics, but it was politics that interested him more and towards which he was suspicious. The volume presents politics as a producer of narratives and images and at the same time a very tangible force shaping our existences. It consists of concrete power relations, hierarchies, rules and an apparatus of violence. Here, politics is not a fascinating force to be confronted in collective action in order to oppose its contemporaneous state with utopian or radical visions of a different order – as in the large political projects of modernity. It is a space of

impersonal and omnipresent power, against which we can protect restrained and fragile life projects rather than challenge it with a strong political blueprint of our own. White seems to be saying that politics raises anxiety rather than hope and it seems safer to deal with ethics: individual, careful, small-scale action.

Ewa Domańska: Ethics of historical justice: Reading Hayden White with Vine Deloria Jr.

Thanks to the rich collection of texts by Hayden White edited by Robert Doran, I was able to read White's commentary on John Brown Childs' *Transcommunalism: From the Politics of Conversion to the Ethics of Respect* (2003), which I did not know before. I am delighted that there are more little-known essays in this important anthology that present White's views on modern patriotism, the historical museum, art history, and world history (among other subjects).

'We live in an age of postcommunality', writes White. In his ironic style and in the spirit of Marxism, White issues a harsh critique of the romanticized approach to community as 'a nostalgic reflection on the disappearance of small-scale social formations', and 'as a rallying cry for groups threatened by assimilation to the exigencies of a transnational market geared to consumerism' (White and Doran 2022, 105). He claims that community was destroyed by predatory capitalism and consumerism. This essay motivates me to approach White's ideas in a similar manner to Childs – by reference to the Indigenous knowledges that inspire Childs' vision of a 'future transcommunalism'. In my case, the current Indigenous turn helps me to sustain (a critical) hope that another world (and other knowledge of the world) is possible. A mobilization of various knowledges and ways of knowing is needed to build different scenarios of the future. Thus, I explore the question of relations between Indigenous and Western knowledges and ways of knowing and attempting to co-create complementary approaches to the past that will allow a different, more inclusive, transcultural, and trans-species knowledge of the past to emerge in the future.

Hayden White was not interested in Indigenous knowledges, relations between humans and non-humans, animal or plant studies, or similar trends considered these days to be radical or at least avant-garde. White referred to the 'Natives' when reflecting both on the 'The Forms of Wildness' (1972) and 'The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish'

(1976), as well as when he commented on modernist literature such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ('Exile and Abjection', 2006). Still, his critical approach to history as 'a specifically Western prejudice' (White's phrase) and interest in narrative/storytelling might help to explore possibilities of bridging Indigenous and Western approaches to the past. This is what I am going to propose in this short commentary.

Judith Butler, in her outstanding introduction to White's anthology, predicts that 'In some future time, it may be possible to read Kafka with Hayden White' (Butler 2022, xii). While I find this project very promising, I was more enthusiastic to learn that David Myer Temin and Adam Dahl had read the Indigenous historian Vine Deloria Jr., of the Standing Rock Sioux people, through the lens of White. However, I am even more interested in doing vice-versa: reading Hayden White with Vine Deloria. I do not think that White ever mentioned Deloria (or any other Native American scholars) in his writing. However, White is recognized by Indigenous scholars and appreciated for his criticism of academic history and its pretension to objectivity, as well as his practical and non-scientific (more artistic) approach to the past (Mihesuah 2003).⁵

When researching intersections between Hayden White's and Vine Deloria's ideas, it is important to remember that they represent very different worldviews and disciplinary backgrounds: while White was an intellectual of the Western tradition, a humanist and an existentialist Marxist, and worked on the theory and history of historiography, Deloria was a Native American scholar, a theologian and activist working on Native American history and religion. Despite notable differences, I think that the problem of historical in/justice might provide an ethical platform for discussing complementarity between Indigenous and Western knowledges of the past as represented by Deloria and White.

In an article titled 'Narrating Historical Injustice' (2017), David Myer Temin and Adam Dahl use White's tropology to analyze Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) (Temin and Dahl 2017, 905–917). The authors are interested in how historical injustice is remembered and represented and in how various representations might open or limit approaches to collective/political responsibility for historical wrongs. The authors argue that 'Deloria questions tragedy's aspiration to be a marker of moral and political maturity and self-knowledge'. Deloria, the author of *God is Red* (1973), they find,

‘uses irony and satire to expose the limitations of tragic, romantic, and comedic historical discourses in conceptualizing the responsibility that settler-colonial societies have taken up to respond to historical injustice’ (Temin and Dahl 2017, 907, 912). For Deloria, treaties made between the federal government and American Indian nations were ‘ironic documents’, thus ironic counter-narrative is required to produce a ‘politics of postcolonial responsibility’ (Temin and Dahl 2017, 913). The problem of historical injustice requires a constant effort to challenge and revise dominant narratives about the past that justify land theft, forced relocation, and the destruction of Indigenous cultures and traditions. White’s theory, firstly, helps to demystify oppressive narratives, and, secondly, encourages the creation of emancipatory and empowering stories.

These two very influential scholars were active in the same period, with both advocating for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of history and culture, and were both concerned with the ways narratives shape our understanding of the world. Deloria’s work on the importance of Indigenous perspectives and traditions, as well as his critiques of Western modes of thought, are relevant to White’s broader project of examining the processes through which historical narratives are constructed and how they provide coherent and meaningful representations of the past. They both argue that a fundamental shift in the way that history is taught and understood is necessary since dominant historical narratives have maintained global capitalism and imperialism (White) or colonialism (Deloria) as forms of oppression and injustice. Thus, it might be fruitful for the future of the theory of history to analyze in more detail the connections between their work in order to explore relations between storytelling and individual and collective responsibility for the future. Such approaches could employ the lenses of the power of storytelling, the knower’s standpoint, the transgenerational transmission of knowledge, and the ethics of respect.

Herman Paul: How to analyze climate change narratives

Climate change does not seem to have been a topic of great concern to Hayden White. In his published writings, at least, he only sporadically alludes to it, associating it with slow changes in the realm of Fernand Braudel’s *histoire de longue durée* more than with catastrophes of the kind that figure so prominently in his later essays (White 2009, 871).

Consistent with this pattern, climate change is also absent from the index to *The Ethics of Narrative*. In their turn, historical theorists working on climate change-related topics do not typically draw on White, even if they are familiar with his work. Dipesh Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), for example, does not mention White even once.

Prompted by Ewa Domańska's remarks on historical injustice and responsibility for the future (see also Domańska 2018), I would like to suggest that there is, nonetheless, a way in which White's work can be productively brought to bear on climate change or, more specifically, on how human beings make sense of climate change by crafting narratives about it. As all readers of this journal know, White's *Metahistory* offers a toolkit for analyzing historical narratives, central to which are (in my own words) four questions: What is the plot of the narrative? What is the moral of the story? What sort of causes and effects does the narrative identify? And what kind of realism does it presuppose (i.e. what sort of characters does it imbue with agency and what type of situations does it recognize as real – see Paul 2011, 57–81)?

The Ethics of Narrative shows White answering these questions for the most diverse of narratives, varying from genealogies of Europe (Chapter 3) to the 'shower of discourses' that rained down on the Italian town of Sarno after landslides destroyed much of the area in May 1998 (Chapter 4). In her contribution to this issue, Domańska refers to David Meyer Temin and Adam Dahl using White's toolkit in engaging with Native American scholar Vine Deloria. Along similar lines, we might draw on White in analyzing climate change stories of the sort that we encounter on a daily basis in the press and on the Internet: stories about melting ice and forest dieback, tipping points and looming disasters, or green technology and sustainable development.

'Why White?' a skeptic might ask. 'Isn't there a plethora of other tools with which such climate change narratives can be analyzed?' When, not too long ago, I taught a class on environmental humanities, I asked my students, with backgrounds from across the humanities, how they would analyze the newspaper stories that I had selected for them. Some students referred (somewhat predictably) to framing theories as developed in communication research. Others came up with narratological approaches outweighing White's in subtlety and technical refinement (e.g. Meretoja 2017 – a book one wishes White

would have been able to respond to). These alternatives notwithstanding, White's four questions turned out to work pretty well, in our classroom setting at least, especially when we took some liberty in bending them to the topic at hand.

Scholars working on climate change narratives often argue that stories of 'doom and gloom' are ineffective in bringing about much-needed lifestyle changes: they paralyze instead of mobilize their readers (e.g. Hinkel et al. 2020). But what are the alternatives? White's catalog of plot structures is helpful to the extent that it encourages us to experiment with alternative narrative templates available in our cultural repertoires. It urges us to explore: What happens, with what benefits and at what costs, if we try to re-plot the story? Likewise, White's attention to different kinds of realism ('prefiguration of the historical field') invites reflection on what Bruno Latour (2017) calls the distribution of agency in climate change narratives. What are the agents – human beings, zoonotic pathogens, the Sarno mountains, God, Gaia – populating such accounts? Is it true, as Amitav Ghosh (2016) argues, that we are so accustomed to the realism of the nineteenth-century realistic novel that we tend to regard a cyclone of the sort that hit North Delhi in March 1978 as too unlikely to be real?

Kalle Pihlainen's comments, elsewhere in this issue, raise the question of why we should engage in such analysis. I share Pihlainen's suspicion of premature closure. This does not imply, however, that we should limit ourselves to criticizing hegemonic narratives (such as the story that improved technology will fix our climate problems). In addition to identifying blind spots and false assumptions in the stories dominating the media, we might want to expand the range of available narratives, for instance by retrieving half-forgotten storylines – more or less as *Metahistory* did by situating Leopold von Ranke (White's *bête noire*) in a historiographical culture that also included Jules Michelet, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Jacob Burckhardt (White 1973). Mike Hulme (2009, 322–365) points the way here by insisting that we need more rather than fewer climate change narratives, as all plots both reveal and conceal dimensions of who we are and where we are going.

Finally, I like to think that such a project, engaging with both the ethics and the politics of historical thinking as defined by Jakub Muchowski (this issue), may offer the beginning of an answer to Nancy Partner's soul-searching question of what, if anything, historical theory has to offer at a moment when academic historiography

finds itself increasingly under threat (Partner 2023). Following White, I would say that historical theory tries to understand people's relations with the past as they manifest themselves not only in academic historiography but also in collective memory, popular historical consciousness, and media narratives (Paul 2015). At a time when so much seems to depend on how humans envision their future on this planet, historical theorists might do worse than apply the tools of their trade to the genre of climate change narratives.

Ewa Domańska: Hayden White and the metaphysics of history

In their inspiring comments, Herman Paul focuses on Hayden White's approach to the problem of the social construction of history versus historians' constructions of the past, Jakub Muchowski concentrates on the relation between ethics and politics in White's writing, while Kalle Pihlainen directs readers' attention to White's essay 'The Metaphysics of Western Historiography' (2004), which he considers 'essential reading for anyone wishing to scrutinize [White's] core claims'. I agree with Pihlainen about the importance of this text. It would also be significant to study in more detail White's attitude toward metaphysics (and religion) in general. Inquiring into this problem might give us a different insight into White's understanding of the use of history and the role of historians in reflecting on the complexity of human existence and the past. Indeed, as Marnie Hughes-Warrington observes, the metaphysical activities of historians should indeed be of interest to us (Hughes-Warrington 2015, 283).

Those of us who had a chance to sit in on Hayden White's seminars might recall that, in his teaching on the Italian Renaissance, he likes to refer to Raphael's masterpiece *The School of Athens* (c. 1509–1511). The central part of the painting is occupied by an old, gray Plato, who holds *Timaeus* and points up toward the heavens (and the ideals), and his student, Aristotle, who holds *Nicomachean Ethics* and gestures down toward the earth (the physical world). White is suspicious of metaphysics. In his characteristic style, he announces: 'We posthumanists conceive ourselves to live "after metaphysics"' (White 2000, 12). But what does it actually mean to live after metaphysics? For White, it means to live in the history that has replaced religion and metaphysics. As White claims, 'In the absence of any possible appeal to religion and metaphysics, "history" (a kind of information) may be all we have left as a possible foundation for a knowledge adequate to



Figure 1. Hayden White, Rogalin, Poland, 2005. Photo credit: Ewa Domańska.

the challenges that “history” (a culturally specific structuration of temporality) itself poses for the West’ (White and Doran 2022, 185).⁶

Yet, in the photo that I took of Hayden White when he visited Poland in 2005, one can see him standing on a pedestal (Figure 1), striking the same pose as Plato in Raphael’s painting and imitating the exact same gesture of the Greek philosopher pointing his finger toward the heavens (Figure 2). What is more, when I asked Hayden White what image he would like placed on the cover of the second volume of his essays translated into Polish (White and Domańska 2009) he asked for *The Great Metaphysician* by Giorgio de Chirico (1917) (Figure 3). When



Figure 2. Raphael, 'The School of Athens' (1509–1511), detail presenting Aristotle and Plato ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22The_School_of_Athens%22_by_Raffaello_Sanzio_da_Urbino_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22The_School_of_Athens%22_by_Raffaello_Sanzio_da_Urbino_(cropped).jpg)).

I curiously inquired why he had chosen this particular painting for the cover, White replied:

'The Great Metaphysician' is the quintessential modernist painting not only because it shows the 'metaphysician' as a creation made of elements derived from debris, but also because it depicts the metaphysician as an imposing figure who, on the one hand, expects obedience to his thinking and, on the other, exposes the gaps in his being. Modernism is above all a rejection of metaphysics, offering no substitute. The 19th century suggested that the void left by the death of metaphysics could be filled by history, but this did not happen. And metaphysics returned [...], but as a scarecrow.⁷

The last sentence seems like a paraphrase of the idea often cited by White from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that facts and personages in world history occur twice: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce (White 1973, 320). Still, I continue to wonder what



Figure 3. Giorgio de Chirico, „Il grande metafisico” (1917) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Giorgio_de_Chirico,_1917,_Il_grande_metafisico,_oil_on_canvas,_104.8_x_69.5_cm.jpg).

White means by the return of metaphysics in the form of a scarecrow. After the book was published, I asked him about this interesting observation and received the following answer:

Why did I compare metaphysics to a scarecrow? Because I believe that it is a scarecrow version of religiosity. Topology does not presuppose any kind of metaphysics. It is based on a rhetorical and grammatical model of discourse. It does not presuppose that tropes are the ultimate or only or absolute reality. It does not even look at language as the ‘world substance’. Metaphysics is about what Plato called ‘on ontos’, the ‘really real’. It may well be that in order to say anything one has to presuppose some kind of ultimate reality, in which case,

one could say that everyone has a metaphysics, either implicitly or, in the case of consciousness, latently. As for judgment, it has to be made on a day to day and situationally determinate basis. Of course, history does not fill the void left by metaphysics, nothing can, because there is no void except in the mind of human beings, who are always trying to find meaning, when the real problem or at least a basic problem is to distinguish between what is 'real' (a pure abstraction) and what is 'actual' i.e. 'concrete'.⁸

White was suspicious of hermeneutics, which in his view 'is the last gasp of metaphysics' (Domańska 1998, 37). He also claims that Paul Ricoeur's *Temps et récit* proposes 'a metaphysics of narrativity' and 'a theology of history with God left out' (White 1987b; White and Doran 2022, 158–159). However, if metaphysics, as defined by White, is a theology of history without God, then history is a form of metaphysics, and key concepts of historical thinking – such as power, nation, patriotism, will, and historicity – are metaphysical ideas (Domańska 1998, 32). Robert Doran is right when he states that for White, 'history is not some neutral ground from which to launch anti-metaphysical missiles but is itself shot through with metaphysical assumptions' (Doran 2022, xxviii). Metaphysics – as represented by a scarecrow made of historical, post-religious waste – reminds us of the 'disenchantment of the world'. History is an ersatz religion, but historical thinking still contains and preserves cryptotheological ideas which are also present in Hayden White's works, as was recently demonstrated by Tomasz Wiśniewski in his post-secular reading of White (Wiśniewski 2020).⁹ Thus, when Herman Paul remarks in his comments that White prefers to use terms such as 'poetic imagination' or 'prefigurative act' rather than a term like construction, which seems too mechanistic, this could be a sign that a particular form of historical metaphysics – as present in his idea of poetics, figura, pre/figuration, etc. —permeates these terms.

As I suggest in my readings of Hayden White, a different phase in his interests emerges in the mid-1990s, when his 'figural creationism' becomes an alternative for 'tropical evolutionism'. White here returns to his interest in *the figure* and concepts such as fulfillment, myth, crisis, *kairos*, catastrophe, and utopia, which begin to appear in his writing more often and in different contexts than before. The figure, as I claim, is a metaphysical concept that, for White, provides the basis for a new paradigm of thought; it is a site where the remains of metaphysics can be resurrected, a *locus* of ethics. His interest in the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan gives White's conceptualization of the figure new interpretive possibilities beyond Eric Auerbach's

understanding of this concept. The figure is a chasm, a wound marking the transition between the conscious and unconscious of discourse, while the figural space constitutes the location of the unconscious of discourse. Following Freud, White thus seems to be searching for foundations among those concepts which have been displaced, excluded, or rejected from discourse, with figures serving as the guides on his journey (Domańska 2002, 325–326).¹⁰

Jakub Muchowski: The depoliticization of history?

The established narratives of modernity by, for example, Max Weber and Jürgen Habermas speak of a progressive separation of different forms of human activity, including politics, ethics, art and science. Within each of these, an independent expert culture is being constituted, which separates itself from everyday life and ordinary people. White often questioned these narratives and generally tended to breach boundaries rather than patrol them. Most often he questioned the boundaries between literature (art), politics, ethics and history (science). I would like to address the *Ethics of the Narrative* volume, but also White's writings in general, with some additional questions about the relationship between the aforementioned four fields.

To what extent was White suspicious of politics? In their commentaries, Ewa Domańska, Herman Paul, and Kalle Pihlainen make it clear that White's project was geared towards recognizing and unmasking the ideological components of historical writing, especially challenging dominant capitalist, imperialist and colonialist narratives about the past. He also argued for the production of one's own alternative narratives that, alongside unmasking power relations, violence and injustice, avoided their reproduction by complicating representations of the past and refusing to provide closure.

Paul additionally stipulated, however, that White's contribution to historical theory can be used for more than just detecting the hidden play of political forces. Despite White's own lack of such intentions, his proposal can be used to augment the body of stories that make sense of important contemporary questions, and perhaps offer hope and outline optimistic scenarios for the future. In other words, although White himself acted with a different intention, the tools and arguments he constructed can be used for political action in historical writing, for example to intervene in public debates about global inequalities, migration or the climate crisis.

However, if we leave this reservation aside for the moment, the observations above suggest that, according to White, the politics of historical writing should be about practicing anti-politics. This corresponds, moreover, to an interpretation not uncommon in discussions of the humanities and social sciences, which says that a turn to ethics in a given research sphere means depoliticizing it. Its rationale is that the focus on the individual's choices, on his or her relationship to himself or herself, including his or her own past, is combined with a turning away, with reluctance and suspicion, from questions about the framework of the collective, about the ways in which decisions are made, about determining who can belong to it and speak on its behalf.

But does White really depoliticize history in his writing? One might say that he does so when he reinterprets the distinction between historical and practical past by Michael Oakeshott. Chapter twelve, which I have already mentioned, is one of the first contributions in which White uses this distinction, discussed more extensively in his later book *Practical Past* (2014). In this division, depoliticization would refer to the historical past, that is, to academic historical writing that is not meant to have a political function. Admittedly, the historical past is, as he writes in chapter twelve, 'a kind of normative version of the past of a community' however, professional historiography has constructed it as if this past 'can have no further bearing (if they ever had any bearing at all) upon the present(s) of a given community'. In this view, professional historical writing also fails to connect with ethical activity because, as White explains, the historical past 'has no practical use whatsoever'.

It is the practical past that is used for political and ethical activities. The practical past is, he writes, the past to which people refer in their ordinary lives when they 'appeal to "history" to teach a lesson, point to a moral, justify an action taken, or vindicate a wrong.' This enumeration seems misleading, for it directs readers' attention only to ethical or existential questions, suggesting that the practical past does not serve political activity and the latter is pushed beyond the scope of White's take. However, White's subsequent texts collected in the later *Practical Past* correct this ambiguity. It is indeed the case that academic historical writing is depoliticized, but it itself ceases to be relevant to White and its place is taken by non-academic historical practices, of which politics, along with ethics, remains an important component.

In reconfiguring Oakeshott's distinction, White goes against what he has accustomed his readers to – instead of challenging divisions, he erects a new one. However, this gesture can be read differently. Having renewed

this division, White focuses only on the practical past, paying little attention to the historical past. The former, on the other hand, is the sphere in which the types of activity that modernity was supposed to separate are brought together: ethics, politics, art and science. There, the relationship between politics and ethics remains unclear (with ethics being the more important of the two) and the difference between the two blurred.

Miguel Valderrama: Hayden White in translation

‘Event’ is a kind of untranslatable, philosophical word, the symptom of a stuttering at the moment of thinking politically about the Spanish reception of Hayden White’s work. That this symptom gives rise to another order of reading, that in the failure of the task of translation a void of interpretation becomes visible, a white on white in the Whitean text, is a cipher of a way of reading that in its very blindness reveals a thought of the ‘Event’ at the center of Hayden White’s philosophy of history. Richard Vann pointed out almost twenty-five years ago that of the lexicon elaborated in books such as *Metahistory* (1973), *Tropics of Discourse* (1978) or *The Content of the Form* (1987a), the word ‘Event’ was the one that had received the least attention from European and Anglo-American critics. This observation has remained valid, despite the multiplication of publications and editions of White’s work in recent decades. In Spanish, the disparate ways in which the word ‘Event’ has been translated into the English language show a certain figuration of the work of the American historian and philosopher that is organized on the basis of a forclusion of the problematic of the event in the historical narrative. It is worth asking, however, if this forclusion, if this blindness in the reading is not already present in White’s own work, in a politics of historical interpretation that observes in the event a limit of representation.

Thus, there is a proliferation of references to the word ‘event’ in works collected and published in *Figural Realism* (1999), *The Fiction of Narrative* (2010) and *The Practical Past* (2014). Of notable interest, no doubt, are the essays ‘The Politics of Historical Representation’ (1982), ‘Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation’ (1992), ‘The Modernist Event’ (1996) and ‘The Historical Event’ (2008). Remarkable because they configure a theory of the event of broad scope for narrativism. A theory that implies a shift in the Whitean theorization of the ‘event’, a reformulation of the word

broad enough to give rise to a distinction between real events, historical events and modernist events. A distinction that, on the other hand, can be considered as a symptom of an indecision, of an elaboration in transit, which in the very multiplication of predicative forms of 'event' reveals an insistence, a problem, an obsession at the heart of White's theory. That this obsession, this insistence, translates into a simultaneous movement of affirmation and negation is a sign of a reading that apprehends the event as the unimaginable, the incredible.

One could say that *The Ethics of Narrative* returns in its own way to these questions. It returns by translating the problematic of the event in ethical terms. It will be said that this inscription, that this pointing out, is not foreign to the intellectual context in which the problematic of the event arises in continental philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. In his introduction to the projected two-volume edition of *The Ethics of Narrative*, Robert Doran recalls that White's 'late thought', while encompassing a variety of themes and ideas, is at its core overdetermined by a present of extreme violence, national catastrophes and traumatic memories. The reference to 11 September 2001, is crucial here, considering that the two projected volumes bring together interventions written between 1998 and 2017. The date sets in motion not only a question about what happened, about the nature of the event (historical, modernist, sublime, figurative?), but also about the judicative structure of reality. A reflection is organized around this data, a speculative movement that – to borrow a term from Dominick LaCapra – could perhaps be called 'traumatropism'. This curvature on data gives rise to an ethical interpretation of broad scope; an interpretation that may well be described in terms of a turn, a change of direction in the order of discussions in the humanities and social sciences. In the introduction to *The Ethics of Narrative*, Judith Butler seems to confirm this shift of attention by situating the contemporaneity of White's thought in its capacity for interlocution with a world in crisis, unhinged, outside its hinges. In his words: 'In an age of political despair and occasional hope, in a time of profound disorientation and continuing limitations, when people are wondering what they can do, Hayden White has something to say to us'.

The question of the event is thus overdetermined by three contexts that come to validate its translation in ethical terms: the debates of continental philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, the attacks of 11 September 2001, and the ongoing debates on the extinction of humanity due to global warming. And yet, it is not certain that we are in the presence of the same notion of event (one could argue, for example, that the notion

of event such as that proper to the philosophy of Alain Badiou belongs to a modern regime of historicity, while that which circulates in the discussions of the ‘Anthropocene’ would be one that no longer responds to the time management devices of modernity), or that this notion points to a ‘reference’ that can be described in terms proper to a historical reality. Nor is it certain that a discussion of ethics, re-directed in terms of a theory of choice, would be able to account for the problematic that the event imposes on the structures of signification that give rise to a world, to meaning, to signification.

Kalle Pihlainen: Considering fidelity and consequence

Returning to consider Hayden White and *The Ethics of Narrative* after being inspired by the commentaries here is a privilege. The thoughts offered by Herman Paul, Jakub Muchowski, Ewa Domańska and Miguel Valderrama in the texts that I had the opportunity to read for this response open a multitude of vistas onto White. Of these, I want, in this brief comment, to elaborate on one central idea that appears to be touched on by each of these contributors, albeit in quite different ways.

Explaining how their various perspectives come together for me is perhaps easiest if I begin from the end: In his contribution, Miguel Valderrama makes a crucial observation regarding the multiplicity of ‘the event’ as well as the untranslatability and the obduracy of the concept for White (as, indeed, for so many philosophical discussions). Valderrama further notes that ethics – if formulated in terms of decision and choice – cannot properly deal with the kinds of ruptures that some events are seen to introduce. As he notes, the connection of event to meaning is at best tenuous. Valderrama’s introduction of Alain Badiou in this context is apt; and, for me, key is Badiou’s insistence that the event, something ‘evental’, demands fidelity for its observance after the experience itself. This attitude seems integral to understanding White too, albeit nowhere overtly explored.

Aligning with this theme of fidelity, Herman Paul raises a parallel issue. For Paul (as for Robert Doran in his introduction to the volume as well as in much other work), White’s attention to the ‘act of will’ throughout his oeuvre reflects his desire to see individuals as active agents of their futures, capable of disbelieving given values and refusing societal expectations. In this, White calls on his audience to – as Paul phrases it – ‘join him in unmasking social constructions of history, [...] to choose a past for themselves rather than have one chosen for them’.

Challenging entrenched societal narratives is not the easiest of tasks, however, even without the kinds of operations of ‘reality maintenance’ that Paul points to in comparing White’s views with those of Berger and Luckmann. Against such mechanisms of co-option and incorporation, no simple eventual insight is likely to stand long without consistent reaffirmation and a management of fidelity. This means that moving from any experience of historicity to action is similarly conditional on maintaining one’s beliefs against the odds. And this is so even on the elemental level of meaning-making. Imposing meaning on ‘events’ (or, more romantically, accepting the meanings ‘revealed’ by them, if one were so inclined) is one form of projecting that fidelity into the world when moving from experience to descriptions and values. Thus, in a world which, as noted earlier, ‘presents itself as ruins and clutter’ (151), we cannot only rely on our ‘desire for coherency in response to anxieties generated by the apprehension of the past as “blooming, buzzing confusion”’ (154) but must instead in turn generate and project coherence on the basis of assumed values while reaffirming said fidelity in contouring our descriptions.

In directing our attention to the critical yet often overlooked distinctions between the ethical and the political in White, Jakub Muchowski draws out the implications of these for identity formation, turning attention to a problematic that has been at the core of many philosophical debates about positions like White’s – foremost, among his contemporaries, those of Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida. How can we construct identity at all when differences appear endless? (Following the 1990s debates regarding a postmodernist universalization of difference and consequent collapse of the political, much more nuance has been brought to the discussion through ANT, focus on intersectionality, and so on, but the core issue remains: if difference is so pervasive and appears at every level, how are we to construct shared identities for political purposes?)

The short answer, returning attention to fidelity, is that any political identity requires a bracketing of differences and a decision concerning continuity of purpose and intentions. Otherwise, the universalization of difference poses an insurmountable challenge to moving from the individual to the collective, as it does for many critics of White and of post-structuralist and relativist positions. Again, fidelity is needed – a fidelity that can sustain some contradictions and affix to an identity geared to a chosen commitment.

As Muchowski notes, White’s solution is essentially to say that historical knowledge can be useful for ‘situational politics and ethics’, yet he falls somewhat short of developing the idea of fidelity to move beyond the

individual. Or rather, White seems not to fully appreciate the broad, communal ground existing between radical individuality and universality that this kind of bracketing of difference and attendant choice and fidelity opens up. Muchowski astutely observes that for White ‘politics raises anxiety rather than hope and it seems safer to deal with ethics: individual, careful, small-scale action’.

At the same time, it may be that this suspicion regarding the constitution of the communal is not a case of philosophical beliefs but rather a matter of political orientation, of White’s intellectual formation, as Ewa Domańska reminds, and as evidenced by White’s sentiment that such ‘community was destroyed by predatory capitalism and consumerism’. While this seems believable, opposition to extreme individualism and consumerism (opposing capitalism’s paradoxical mass ‘divide and conquer’ approach) should not demand a turn to universal ideals. Things may instead be more productively approached through temporary suspensions of difference within the sphere of the political, aligned to choice and consequent fidelity, as so many of White’s philosophical leanings suggest, even if he never fully elaborates on them.

Robert Doran: Response to commentaries on White’s *The Ethics of Narrative* Vol. 1

I appreciate this opportunity to engage with these commentaries, which represent some of the most authoritative voices in the theory of history and on White’s work. They are extremely thought provoking and certainly deserve more space than I can devote to them here.

These two volumes of White’s late thought were intended, first, to gather in one place a great deal of White’s disparate, hard-to-find, and unpublished pieces, alongside some more well-known but previously uncollected articles. The vast majority of the essays in both volumes are occasional pieces. They are thus not driven by an internal need for intellectual expression, in contrast to White’s work prior to his retirement from UC Santa Cruz in 1995. I thus somewhat agree with Kalle Pihlainen when he writes ‘Indeed, it is clear why [the essays in *The Ethics of Narrative*] are not, as developed here, among the ones White included in his own essay collections’. Pihlainen laments that some of the arguments are underdeveloped, given the constraints of the occasions for which they were written. Nevertheless, I think that one can also see this as a virtue rather than a defect: for one gets a very different White in the occasional pieces. One finds some of White’s most suggestive, personal, and remarkable observations in these

uncollected pieces, some of which were not even published. In volume 1 of *The Ethics of Narrative*, there are two brilliant unpublished pieces that contain important formulations not found elsewhere in White's oeuvre, Chapter 2, 'Symbols and Allegories of Temporality', and Chapter 12, 'Historicality as a Trope of Political Discourse: Rhetoric, Ethics, Politics'. Indeed, many commentators were struck by the latter's explicit articulations of White's personal political views. Jakub Muchowski observes that 'White also adopted a suspicious attitude towards politics outside the field of historical writing, in statements that give the impression of being more personal'. I knew that the following passage from the conclusion of Chapter 12 was going to provoke a strong reaction:

As for politics, I am interested only in the problem of constructing a viable democratic community, constructing a state that will serve the interests of fairness for its citizens and practice a policy of respect and open-mindedness vis-à-vis other kinds of communities, and serve as referee to assure fair practices among the various groups that make up what is called civil society and provide safeguards for the least privileged of its members. Of course, this conception of politics in our time must imply an interest in the various threats to such a model: religious systems of all kinds (fundamentalist as well as enlightened), the various totalitarian systems spawned by the twentieth century and beyond, and what I take to be the greatest threat to a democratic polity, the global corporatist business system. (183–184)

This passage puts to rest efforts by some to see White as a Marxist (in the mold of a Fredric Jameson or a Terry Eagleton), when he is in fact more of a standard social liberal (like Richard Rorty), a true *anti-authoritarian*. This is a trait White shares with much of the critical writing dubbed poststructuralist or postmodernist, discourses concerned primarily with destabilizing the *authority* of truth, reality, history, religion, capitalism, and of political/social orders that rely on a transcendent (non-democratic) justification. Marxism obviously fits oddly with these anti-authoritarian discourses, which is why their principal avatars take pains to distance themselves from it (Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, etc.).

Expressed more positively, one can see White as one of the most prominent thinkers to practice the 'demystification of demystification' (as Gianni Vattimo puts it in his 1989 book, *La società trasparente* [*The Transparent Society*]) in the realm of historiography. Modern history begins with, and is defined by, Ranke's demystification of history in the nineteenth century. White's critical metahistory takes Ranke as its point of departure for the poetic/rhetorical demystification of the scientific/scientistic demystification of historical writing. Following the arc of this double

demystification has been White's life project, the guiding intellectual thread from 'The Burden of History' to *The Ethics of Narrative*. I thus disagree with Ewa Domańska's assertion that: 'The figure, as I claim, is a metaphysical concept that, for White, provides the basis for a new paradigm of thought; it is a site where the remains of metaphysics can be resurrected, a locus of ethics'. White distinguished tropology from metaphysics. Ricoeur's 'allegory of temporality' was metaphysical for White insofar as it presented itself as a 'true allegory' (White 1987b, 171), that is, as not truly allegorical. Ricoeur thought that, in White's words, 'the lives and projects of historical agents actually took the form of narratives'. White concludes that 'this allowed Ricoeur to salvage a correspondence theory of historical truth' (White and Doran 2023, 163). Like Rorty, White refuses to countenance a correspondence theory of historical truth and is thus resolutely anti-metaphysical.

What, then, was White seeking to accomplish in his later years? One project, as I have argued, is certainly the development of the ethical implications of the 'demystification of demystification', which White began to address in earnest in the 1990s. It is perhaps not a coincidence that White allows his thought after 2000 to be guided more by the invitations he received than by organically conceived intellectual projects. The exception is, of course, 'the practical past', which seemingly emerges out of White's reading of Ricoeur's *History, Memory, Forgetting* (Fr. 2000, Eng. 2004), as I argue in my introduction to the second volume of *The Ethics of Narrative* (xxvii-xxxi). Indeed, the last book White published, and the *only* book he published in the two decades between *Figural Realism* (1999) and his death in 2018, was *The Practical Past* (2014). *The Practical Past* is a relatively slim and tightly focused collection; it almost resembles a monograph rather than a collection of essays on a single topic. It certainly foregrounds ethics ('practical' in a Kantian sense) in a way that White's previous collections did not.

The occasional pieces that make up the bulk of the two volumes of the *Ethics of Narrative* treat ethical questions in relation to specific events or topics, and it is safe to assume that White would not have addressed many of these topics had he not been prompted to do so. For example, he would not have written an essay on 'the Sixties' (Chapter 7 of vol. 2 of *The Ethics of Narrative*) had he not been asked to contribute to the volume *Revisiting the Sixties*, or an essay on 'modern politics' (Chapter 5, of vol. 2 of *The Ethics of Narrative*) had he not been invited to contribute to a volume entitled *The Politics of the Imagination*. And I could give many similar examples from volume 1. The fact that White *did agree* to address such disparate topics

points to two factors: 1) White's desire to remain relevant, to *respond* to the present (and what better way to do this than to allow specific invitations to guide his intellectual agenda?); 2) White's interest in expanding his 'poetics of history' to ethically and politically inflected topics. Thus, these two volumes present White as more of a public intellectual than a historical theorist per se (Rorty also merged these two roles in his later work). I thus completely agree with Muchowski's observation that 'politics seems an important topic of the volume. White frequently came back to the question of political identities and the conflicts between legitimacy-seeking state or economic power and the social changes taking place'. This is especially the case in Chapter 3 of volume 1, on 'The Discourse of Europe', by far the longest piece in the volume (which includes a previously unpublished section of the essay).

Herman Paul addresses White's double demystification thus:

Would [White] have agreed that his 'liberation historiography', as I have dubbed his project, privileged moments of unmasking, exposing, and uncovering over what Berger and Luckmann call 'reality maintenance', simply because fighting the hegemony of powerful historical fictions was for him a more urgent task than the development of sustainable alternatives? Or would he have rejected Berger's and Luckmann's argument as yet another dangerous construction of reality – a 'sociologism' that defines the real in such a way as to sacrifice individual liberty to social necessities?

Indeed, I think that White saw as his most urgent task the fight against 'the hegemony of powerful historical fictions', or rather, their authority. White remained faithful to the Sartrean project of safeguarding human freedom by pointing out the bad faith (*la mauvaise foi*) of those in the historical profession who hide behind the authority of the real. White, like Rorty, equates epistemology with the authority of the real: objectivity, correspondence to historical reality, reconstruction instead of construction, etc.

Commenting on White's anti-epistemology, Pihlainen writes:

Indeed, even if we had access to all possible information, meaning is a product of historicization and narrativization, of valuation, never something somehow 'discoverable' in evidence. Or, as White explains this in the chapters discussed: 'it is only as enfigured that historical reality can take on an aspect of a meaning at once revealed and concealed by the forms that events seem to display to perception as told or written about'. Consequently, if we view historicization as retroactive meaning-making appealing to a faux dynamic of anticipation and later fulfillment, it becomes clear that while this fulfillment inevitably fails in the epistemic sense it simultaneously always 'succeeds' within this logic of history making.

This point is well taken. But I don't think White would agree with the characterization of a 'faux dynamic' (particularly since he distinguished the aesthetic from the theological understanding of figuralism; White 1999, 90); it is a matter of agents and historians *choosing* their own past, choosing the past they would like to actualize as *their* past, as against any putatively genetic (biological, efficient-causal) relation. It is only a 'faux dynamic' in a strict epistemological framework, which itself has been subject to trenchant critiques by Arthur Danto and others. Danto's similarly retrospective 'narrative sentences' always succeed in making history.

In his comment, Miguel Valderrama observes that White sees the problem of the historical event in ethical terms:

One could say that *The Ethics of Narrative* returns in its own way to these questions. It returns by translating the problematic of the event in ethical terms. It will be said that this inscription, that this pointing out is not foreign to the intellectual context in which the problematic of the event arises in continental philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century.

Yes, I think that this is right, although White is thinking this – the event as figure – through Auerbach and not through continental philosophy (at least not primarily). But I also think that the concept of the 'event' is undertheorized in White and does not receive the kind treatment that reflections on Heidegger's *Ereignis*, for example, have inspired in continental thought.

In her piece, Ewa Domańska begins by focusing on White's essay on 'transcommunity':

'We live in an age of postcommunality', writes White. In his ironic style and in the spirit of Marxism, White makes a harsh critique of the romanticized approach to community as 'a nostalgic reflection on the disappearance of small-scale social formations', and 'as a rallying cry for groups threatened by assimilation to the exigencies of a transnational market geared to consumerism' (105). He claims that the community was destroyed by predatory capitalism and consumerism. This essay motivates me to approach White's ideas in a similar manner to what Childs did – by reference to the Indigenous knowledges that inspire Childs' vision of a 'future transcommunality'.

As much as White is suspicious of nostalgia, he is rather surprisingly open to the idea of utopia, which is a kind of reverse nostalgia. The difference for White is that between an unrecoverable past and a future projection than can only be heuristic and voluntaristic. White observes (in 'The Future of Utopia in History') that 'Modern utopias are born of a reaction to modernity itself. Although this reaction may take the form of an idealized vision

of what once had been (pastoral or peasant life, the life of the village, the tribe, or the *ethnos* still connected to nature), it is still impelled to take this bit of redeemed past and “make it new”, or re-make it (re-birth it), so as to accommodate it to desires and/or anxieties of a recognizably “modernist” kind (White and Doran 2023, 9). Utopic thinking is thus more about renewal than a simple return to the past and as such is consonant with White’s figuralism (figure-fulfillment structure).

Notes

1. Indeed, regrettably, the commonalities between these chapters extend to half of Chapter 5 being repeated almost verbatim (compare pp. 85–89 and pp. 159–164).
2. There appear to be two key lapses here: first, White does not explain how what he asserts historians conventionally do relates to the Christian model of enfiguration that he introduces; second, he fails to make clear the reasons for turning from historicization following the figure-fulfillment model to the kind of representation he attributes to Benjamin.
3. Starting with ‘A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White’s Linguistic Humanism’, in Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 193–227.
4. This is in fact the talk he gave at the ‘Rhetoric, Ethics, Politics’, conference, held at the University of Ghent, Belgium, April 21–23, 2005.
5. For example, a Choctaw historian and writer, Devon A. Mihesuah, remarks: ‘Personally, I side with history philosopher Hayden White who argues that “any science of society should be launched in the service of some conception of social justice, equity, freedom, and progress, that is to say, some idea of what a good society might be”’ (Mihesuah 2003).
6. In the same article, White repeats, ‘For better or worse, after the death of God and the end of metaphysics, history is all we have as the basis for a human science. [...] [I]f our inquiry is directed at what Kant projected as his fourth critique, namely, the question “What is man?” then history is all we’ve got’ (White and Doran 2022, 173).
7. Herman Paul also demonstrates that *Metahistory* is not about the rhetoric of historical texts, but rather about ‘the (metaphysical) views historians hold regarding the nature, goal and purposes of the historical process’ (Paul 2004: 1).
8. Hayden White’s Email Message to Ewa Domanska Dated August 28, 2010.
9. It is not a coincidence that the book titled *Figural Realism* (1999) and the articles republished in the volume such as ‘Catastrophe, Communal Memory and Mythic Discourse. The Uses of Myth in the Reconstruction of Society’ (2000), ‘Figura and Historical Subalternation’ (2000), and ‘The Metaphysics of Western Historiography. Cosmos, Chaos and Sequence in Historiological Representation’ (2004) were written during the same time.
10. Hayden White’s Email Message to Ewa Domanska Dated August 31, 2008. Text authorized.

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Notes on contributors

Ewa Domańska is a full Professor of Human Sciences at the Department of History, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, and a recurrent visiting professor at Stanford University (Spring term). Domańska is a corresponding member of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS), and a member of Academia Europaea. Her teaching and research interests include history and the theory of historiography, new and emerging trends in the humanities and social science, environmental humanities, ecocide and genocide studies. She has recently published *A História para além do humano* [History Beyond the Human], eds. Julio Bentivoglio i Taynna Marino (Fundação Getulio Vargas Press, 2024) and co-edited (with Katarzyna Bojarska, Piotr Filipkowski, Jacek Małczyński, Luiza Nader) *Knowledge in the Shadow of Catastrophe* (Brill, 2024).

Robert Doran is Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Rochester and an Affiliate Faculty member of the Music Theory Department of the Eastman School of Music. He is the author or editor of eight books, including the monographs *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge UP, 2015/2017), which was translated into Spanish in 2021, and *The Ethics of Theory: Philosophy, History, Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2017). Most recently, he has edited *Liszt and Virtuosity* (U of Rochester Press, 2020), co-winner of the 2023 Alan Walker Triennial Book Award, sponsored by the American Liszt Society, and two volumes of Hayden White's late essays for Cornell University Press (vol. 1, 2022; vol. 2, 2023). He has also edited Hayden White's essay collection *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2010), and *Philosophy of History After Hayden White* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

Jakub Muchowski is an adjunct professor at the Department of History of Jagiellonian University. His research focuses on the theory of historical writing, Polish memory cultures, transnational history of Poland and labour history. Ongoing work centres on reading historical writing, transnational relations between

Poland and South Africa and forms of invisibility of labour in industrial museums. He has authored articles in journals including *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* and *Historyka. Studies in Historical Methods*.

Herman Paul is Professor of the History of the Humanities at Leiden University, where he is currently directing a research project on the long-term history of scholarly vices. He is the author of *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (2011), *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (2015), and *Historians' Virtues: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (2022).

Kalle Pihlainen is currently a senior researcher in philosophy at the University of Turku and associate professor of the philosophy of historical culture at the University of Oulu, where he also co-directs the Centre for the Philosophical Studies of History. His research and teaching focus on issues of historical representation and the uses of history in academic as well as popular contexts.

Miguel Valderrama (1971) is a historian and philosopher, specializing in aesthetics and art theory (Universidad de Chile). Since its foundation, he has been a member of the editorial team of the cultural magazine *Papel Máquina*. For *Antonio Gramsci. Artes del retrato*, he won in 2020 the National Prize for Unpublished Essay awarded by the Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Heritage of the Government of Chile. Among other books he has published, *Posthistoria. Historiografía y comunidad* (2005, 2023), *El duelo de la imagen* (2022), *Modernismos historiográficos. Artes visuales, postdictadura, vanguardias* (2008, 2022), *Sublime histórico* (2021), *Antonio Gramsci. Artes del retrato* (2021), *Prefacio a la postdictadura* (2018), *Coloquio sobre Gramsci* (2016), *Traiciones de Walter Benjamin* (2015). He is a co-author of *Hegemonía y visualidad. Inventario [1987-2017]* (2019), *Consignas* (2014) and *Historiografía postmoderna* (2010), as well as an editor of *Patricio Marchant. Prestados nombres* (2012) and *¿Qué es lo contemporáneo? Actualidad, tiempo histórico, utopías del presente* (2011).

ORCID

Ewa Domańska  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0875-976X>

Robert Doran  <http://orcid.org/0009-0009-4084-0139>

Jakub Muchowski  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1193-6966>

Herman Paul  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9365-6329>

Kalle Pihlainen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3361-5840>

Miguel Valderrama  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7504-8410>

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