

JAKUB MUCHOWSKI  
Jagiellonian University, Kraków  
ORCID: 0000-0003-1193-6966

## **THE DEATH OF THE HISTORIAN AND AUTOTELISM, TEXTUALITY AND IMPOTENCE OF HISTORICAL WRITING: HAYDEN WHITE AND THE AUTONOMY OF HISTORY**

### **Abstract**

Hayden White did not directly examine the issue of the independence of history as a discipline of knowledge in his theoretical reflection. He did not ask about the subject of historical studies, the specificity of the methods used in it, the difference between history and other fields, or the economic and social conditions of historical discourse. In this article, I revise White's writing and reconfigure the extant research using the concept of autonomy.

White — primarily in his works from the 1970s and 1980s — devoted much attention to exposing and describing cultural compulsions resulting in historical practices and violating their autonomy. These actions also brought unexpected results. At first, the use of structuralism in these practices, and then poststructuralist concepts of “the death of the author” and textualism, suggested claims that freed historiography from its links with an author's biography and worldview, and with the social context in which a given work is produced. Using Foucault's description of the order of discourse, in turn, brought the image of a strict rigor of historical discipline, which, however, is not equal to the strong autonomy of history.

A stronger delimitation of the field of history appears in his — already in the twenty-first century — offer to use Michael Oakeshott's division into the practical past and the historical past. Whilst censuring academic historical writing as sterile and rejected by readers because it fails to answer contemporary existential, social and political questions, White, most likely unintentionally, described the independence of historians' actions from the demands of the societies to which they belong. According to commentators, his remarks can be a productive inspiration for reflection upon the distinctiveness of the discipline of history.

**Key words:** autonomy of history, discipline of history, impotence of history, textualism, the death of the author

Hayden White did not use the terms of the autonomy of history or the autonomy of historical writing, but he repeatedly referred to the issue of the independence of history in his statements. One can recall, for example, his analyses of the illusion of the distinctiveness of historiography and literature as well as the impact of cultural constraints — external to the discipline — on historians' work, including the inevitable presence of ideology in a historical exposition. White not only blurred the boundaries of the field of history and exposed its dependence on external factors, but also deprecated its practices as nonspecific, obsolete and commonsensical. Once he even provocatively reduced the historians' workshop to writing and reading skills and knowledge of foreign languages.<sup>1</sup>

In the Anglo-American tradition of theoretical reflection on history, Robin Collingwood's statements are the best known proposition to deal with the problem of the autonomy of history. The British philosopher tried to prove the autonomy of the discipline arguing that history produces knowledge in a different way than the dominant paradigm of the natural sciences, has its specific subject of study (history of human thinking) and method (re-enactment).<sup>2</sup> Other important contributions include the concept of Louis O. Mink's historical understanding, in which he captured the discipline's way of explaining past phenomena, and Peter Novick's story about the struggle of American historians with the ideal of objectivity, namely the "discovery" and transfer of knowledge about the past unpolluted by external, for the research process, interferences.<sup>3</sup> Following their influential approaches, it can be said that the concept of "the autonomy of history" means primarily the ability of historical studies to build knowledge according to its own specific rules and not under the influence of factors external to the discipline. They define a specific subject field that is examined with unique research methods and understanding (or explanation).

White was not concerned with the above issues. He undermined the autonomy of history, as his commentators explain, and he often confirmed himself the need to question the existing rules of the discipline of history, to free historians and their audiences from them and thus fuel an inspiration of new ways of dealing with the past. His proposals were called "liberation historiography" and "progressive historiography," while White was a "charismatic teacher" teaching how to rebel, and he himself described his endeavors as liberalizing and anarchist.<sup>4</sup> According to White, the autonomy of history would therefore be about the discipline's ability to free itself from its tradition and radically trans-

<sup>1</sup> Hayden White, "The Burden of History," in Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 40–41.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Robin Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); Peter Johnson, *Collingwood's The Idea of History. A Reader's Guide* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 27–52.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Louis O. Mink, "Autonomy of Historical Understanding," *History and Theory* 5, 1 (1966): 24–47; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> See Herman Paul, *Hayden White. The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge–Malden: Polity Press, 2011), passim; María Inés La Greca, "Narrative Trouble, or Hayden White's Desire

form itself beyond the rules of the nineteenth-century historical discourse, including the division into history and art.

In White's 1966 article, "The Burden of History", there is a section that highlights White's attitude to the autonomy of history:

Thus, historians of this generation must be prepared to face the possibility that the prestige which their profession enjoyed among nineteenth-century intellectuals was a consequence of determinable cultural forces. They must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that, with the passing of the misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought. It may well be that the most difficult task which the current generation of historians will be called upon to perform is to expose the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline, to preside over the dissolution of history's claim to autonomy among the disciplines, and to aid in the assimilation of history to a higher kind of intellectual inquiry which, because it is founded on an awareness of the **similarities** between art and science, rather than their differences, can be properly designated as neither.<sup>5</sup>

As Kalle Pihlainen explains in his commentary on this statement, White believed that history in its existing form was not an indispensable and "natural" element of the world, but a historically conditioned practice. The greatest task facing historians today is to justify its continued functioning as a privileged way of relating to the past. According to Pihlainen, White's long-standing criticism of the discipline was intended to help historians face this challenge. This was supposed to be achieved primarily by shedding light on the historicity, randomness and ineffectiveness of the current rules of the discipline and by postulating their change.

Another attentive reader of this passage, Ethan Kleinberg, suggested that White's recurring criticism was the accusation of historians' adherence to the nineteenth-century understanding of science and art, while contemporary artistic knowledge and practices are based on different rules and methods of work that more accurately and effectively correspond to the needs of our world.<sup>6</sup> I would like to add that from the last sentence of the discussed quotation we can deduce White's non-obvious justification for undermining the boundary between

---

for a Progressive Historiography Refigured by Judith Butler's Performativity Theory," *Storia della Storiografia* 65, 1 (2014): 117–129; Ewa Domańska, "Historiografia wyzwolenia," in Hayden White, *Przeszłość praktyczna*, ed. by Ewa Domańska (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), 273–286; Ewa Domańska, "Hayden White: szkoła buntu," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 11 (2010); Vladimir Sklokin, "It Is Not So Much a Paradigm Shift As a Total Breakdown... A Conversation with Prof. Hayden White," *Historians*, 14 May 2012, <http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/intervyu/258-it-is-not-so-much-a-paradigm-shift-as-a-total-breakdown-a-conversation-with-prof-hayden-white> (accessed: 8.03.2019).

<sup>5</sup> White, *Burden of History*, 29. I would like to thank Ewa Domańska for drawing my attention to this statement by White.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Kalle Pihlainen, *The Work of History* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 4; Ethan Kleinberg, "Hayden White: In Memoriam," *Historian* 80, 4 (2018): 694.

history and literature. It suggests that White's revealing of the literary character of historiography stemmed from the belief that historians should give up the autonomy of the existing form of the discipline of history — which was inexorably doomed to oblivion because of its archaic nature — in favor of combining it with — or even subordinating it to — art. In this way, a new stronger discipline would be constructed, capable of responding to the expectations of the present day.

White's multifaceted critique of the discipline of history and spotlighting the relationship between historical writing and literature had consequences for understanding of the autonomy of history, which he articulated to a limited extent. A few of them are quite obvious and others, I think, are more surprising.

#### AUTOTELISM OF HISTORICAL WRITING

An important component of White's writings, especially in the 1970s, was structuralist thought, which pursuing its universalist aspirations, undermined the boundaries of humanistic and social disciplines. In short, it was aimed at searching for the rules of the universal language of culture generating all its statements. Ethnographers, literary scholars, sociologists, religious scholars, historians and film scholars used more or less the same theory and its method to develop a similarly configured research subject. White directed the vector of these practices towards historiography itself and reconstructed in *Metahistory* the work of non-historical mechanisms governing the historical imagination. He argued that in the process of constructing historical works, the pressure of deep structures plays a dominant role, and the principles of historical method adopted by the community play a smaller role.<sup>7</sup>

Structuralism, however, is not only a complete view of culture which questions the boundaries of cultural disciplines and practices or the recognition of cultural compulsions impacting humanistic and social studies, which undermines their independence. The structuralist approach to historiography also means introducing the concept of the autotelism of language, which declares the suspension of the referential dominant of an utterance and shifts the focus on itself. In literature, this meant that what is crucial in the construction of a novel or a poem are the internal rules of language operation and the relationships connecting them with other novels, poems or genres of expression, while mimetic functions and external conditions for producing an utterance, including its authorship and social context, are less relevant. In historiography, the self-reflexivity of a linguistic statement remains in constant tension with the requirement to describe the events of the past, weakening its authority as a scientific discourse describing the past reality. At the same time, however,

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

it frees historiography from attempts to directly associate it with the figure of the historian himself, including their biography or worldview. It also frees it from simply associating it with the circumstances in which it was produced. The autonomy of literature in relation to the context is extensively discussed by White, who discusses Marxism and modifies its view of literature as a commodity that transcends the conditions in which it was produced. Despite the complex connection with the existing formation, literature remains free to recognize and criticize its own condition and the social, political, economic and cultural system in which it has been produced.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, historiography considered with the use of the concept of autotelism turns out to be, to a certain extent, more independent, because it is governed by the internal logic of the work of historical discourse (which, however, is not identical to the logic of historical studies), and not it is determined by the author's personality or the social, economic and political environment which produced a given historiographical text.

## THE DEATH OF THE HISTORIAN AND HISTORIOGRAPHY AS TEXT

The concept of "the death of the author" and the theory of the text created by Roland Barthes were the poststructuralist reconfiguration of above mention ideas.<sup>9</sup> White engaged them in his writings primarily in the 1980s. We should remember that Barthes criticized the category of the author, which legitimizes

---

<sup>8</sup> White's remarks on the use of the concept of the autotelism of literature in the theory of historical writing are not very extensive and scattered over many texts. This issue is discussed most extensively in the article „Historical Discourse and Literary Theory" (in Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 75–96), in which he responds to the accusations against the use of this concept in historiography and uses the concept of "intentionality". Cf. also Hayden White, "Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground," in: Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 258–259; Hayden White, "Context and the Text," in Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 292; Hayden White, "Foucault's Discourse: The Historiography of Anti-Humanism," in White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 108–109. For the discussion with Marxism, see Hayden White, "Literature and Social Action: Reflections on the Reflection Theory of Literary Art," *New Literary History* 11, 2 (2008): 363–380. See also the discussion of the concept of "relative autonomy" of Louis Montrose's literature: Hayden White, "Formalist and Contextualist Strategies in Historical Explanation," in Hayden White, *Figural Realism. Studies in Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore–London: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 55–63. Cf. also Roman Jakobson, „Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 350–377.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–148; Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 155–164.

the existence of the holder of the correct interpretation of the text, i.e. the arbitrator, who — referring to his own intention — decides how to read a given text. “The death of the author” frees the reader from the obligation to seek a true interpretation and extract the author’s message hidden in the text. It engages the reader in independent reading in which there are no prefabricated interpretations waiting to be reconstructed, but those that can be formulated based on their own experience. In this approach, reading is less a didactic process in which the author communicates his vision of the world to the public and the latter passively imbibes it; and to a greater extent an equal exchange between the text and the active reader who gives it its final form while reading it. “The death of the author” modifies the authority of the author, who loses some control over the way their work is read. It also questions the boundary between an expert and an amateur, suggesting that everybody can be a historian.<sup>10</sup>

The doctrine of textualism, which treats artistic and scientific statements not as works but as texts, has similar consequences. A text — in contrast to a work — is an unfinished construction and the reader may be involved in the building of it. Moreover, a collection of texts, due to their structural similarities, includes not only the sanctified works of consecrated writers and scholars, but all statements produced by culture, regardless of the medium in which they are articulated. This theory undermines the hierarchy of texts built around the notions of being literary, scientific as well as useful and mass-produced, and encourages reading that does not recognize the authority of the author or the text, at the same time opening it to the creative activities of the reader. Textualism confirms the weakening of the author’s position, but the dominant position of the text is also questioned, and the reader’s agency is increased at their expense.<sup>11</sup>

## DISCIPLINING HISTORY

White referred to the problem of the autonomy of history more directly in his “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation” (1982), in which he dealt with history as a discipline. The mere fact that White used this term suggests that it was a period dominated by the thought of Michel

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hayden White, “The Interpretation of Texts,” in Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, ed. by Robert Doran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 208–222; White, *Foucault’s Discourse*, 108–113. The concept of “the death of the author” does not appear directly in White’s writing and functions rather as an unspoken element of the term discourse (or text). Barthes’s proposal, when circulated in the 1970s, ran counter to existentialist beliefs that were important to White at the time, including voluntarism, which was recognized by many commentators. White accepted it to a greater extent in later years as a component of the above-mentioned concepts. For more on this, see Jakub Muchowski, *Polityka pisarstwa historycznego. Refleksja teoretyczna Haydena White’a* (Warszawa–Toruń: Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, 2015), 48–61, 99–103.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. White, *The Interpretation of Texts*, 208–222. See also Muchowski, *Polityka pisarstwa historycznego*, 82–91.

Foucault's *Order of Discourse*. At that time, as one witness to the epoch commented, it was not important what discipline you belonged to, but whether you were sufficiently ashamed of it.<sup>12</sup> In the aforementioned article, White asked what was excluded from the research field of history in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order for it to evolve into a scientific discipline. He ignored the often discussed interpretations of the emergence of history as a discipline pointing to the role of state power which needed to be legitimized in the form of national history in order to consolidate as the modern state. He himself suggested that the justification for the emergence of history was the need for a discipline that would produce knowledge that could act as a "standard of realism" in political action and thought. Historiography was to serve as a measure to help assess which political programs were responsible and feasible, and which were unrealistic and a threat to the social order. In order to fulfill such a defined function, history had to exclude the philosophy of history and utopian thinking from its practices.<sup>13</sup>

History also underwent de-rhetoricization, which, on the one hand, allowed to distinguish historiography from novels, and on the other hand, to fulfill the task of the guardian of political realism. The de-rhetoricization essentially meant adopting the middle style in historiographical forms, which meant the exclusion of the sublime style. White believed the high style could drive utopian thinking and radical action, as it could articulate pain and humiliation, keeping the recipient critically aware of the existing order and evoking in them a desire to radically change the world. The suppression of the sublime is supposed to give historiography the virtue of social responsibility, but it also means, according to White, the legitimacy of recreating the *status quo*.<sup>14</sup>

White himself called for the return of the high style to the arsenal of historiographical forms. As a result of this change, the call-to-action historiography would return, which, however, would not indicate what action was to be taken. Also it would not champion any particular policy option, thus avoiding the risk of doctrinaire teaching.<sup>15</sup>

In "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation", White suggests that the rigor of historical discipline is strong. However, it does not translate into a strong autonomy of history. Although historians protect the discipline in their field themselves, its rules are not scholarly but politically anchored. According to White's unmasking thesis, the middle style in historiography serves to maintain the social order.

---

<sup>12</sup> Barney Cohen's statement was taken from: James Chandler, "Introduction: Doctrines, Disciplines, Discourses, Departments," *Critical Inquiry* 35, 4 (2009); James Chandler, *The Fate of Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 734.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation. Discipline and De-Sublimation," in Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore-London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 60–61.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. White, *Politics of Historical Interpretation*, 65–66.

<sup>15</sup> White, *Politics of Historical Interpretation*, 70–82.

## IMPOTENCE OF HISTORY

White used to question the boundaries of the discipline of history in various ways in his theoretical writings. His call to rethink Michael Oakeshott's distinction between the historical past and the practical past is the first attempt in his reflection to establish such a borderline. Let me just briefly remind you that the historical past is systematic knowledge about the past produced by professional historians, while the practical past is a set of representations, ideas, myths and stories about history that people refer to in their lives, giving meaning to their present activities and plans for the future. White proclaimed several times that after the demise of religion and metaphysics, only history was left for us, and our lives are now directed precisely by the practical past.<sup>16</sup>

Some commentators, including myself, interpreted White's statements as an attempt to save history as a practical, political or public activity. They saw in them a suggestion that historiography would regain its former position as the "teacher of life" and participant in the public sphere, nuancing the understanding of its own autonomy and changing the strategies of depicting history to more modernist ones.<sup>17</sup> Other participants of the discussion questioned the division between the practical and historical past, proving, *inter alia*, the social and political usefulness of professional history.<sup>18</sup>

Kalle Pihlainen, the previously mentioned researcher who has been commenting on his writings for twenty years, approaches White's proposal in a different way. He recalled that White, defining the aforementioned division — unlike in 1966, when in *The Burden of History* he expressed his hope for a great transformation of the discipline of history — declared that he was no longer concerned with historiography, but was focusing on other forms of relating to the past, i.e. the practical past. On the other hand, unlike White, he made an

<sup>16</sup> See Hayden White, "Practical Past," in Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 3–24. The statements about the end of metaphysics and religion and the modern function of history can be found in Hayden White, *Afterword: Manifesto Time*, in: *Manifestos for History*, ed. by Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, Alun Munslow (London-New York: Routledge, 2007), 224; Hayden White, "The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses," *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 333.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Paul, *Hayden White*, passim; Domańska, *Historiografia wyzwolenia*, passim; Muchowski, *Polityka pisarstwa historycznego*, 200–204.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Above, about and beyond the Writing of History: A Retrospective View of Hayden White's Metahistory on the 40th Anniversary of Its Publication," *Rethinking History* 17, 4 (2013): 492–508; La Greca, *Narrative Trouble*; María Inés La Greca, "Hayden White and Joan W. Scott's feminist history: the practical past, the political present and an open future," *Rethinking History* 20, 3 (2016): 395–413; Chris Lorenz, "It Takes Three to Tango: History between the «Practical» and the «Historical» Past," *Storia della Storiografia* 65, 1 (2014): 29–46; Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, "History Manifested: Making Sense of Unprecedented Change," *European Review of History* 22, 5 (2015): 819–834; Jonas Ahlskog, "Michael Oakeshott and Hayden White on the Practical and the Historical Past," *Rethinking History* 20, 3 (2016): 375–394.

attempt to reflect on the historical past, remaining within the general framework of the thought of the American theorist.<sup>19</sup>

Examining White's remarks, Pihlainen has concluded that despite the many changes that have occurred in historiography in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it essentially has remained a discourse with little relevance to matters beyond its own interest. This, in turn, is defined by research questions aimed at an adequate reconstruction of historical facts. The approach of historical research understood in this way cannot be effectively combined with the task of historiography dealing with public and political issues. The task of reconstructing historical events in their complexity, complicated interconnectedness as well as their randomness and ambiguity, produces obstacles to building meaningful, closed and coherent stories that could be effectively used for political or social purposes. Pihlainen seems to claim that the laboriousness of digging through sources and being unsure while considering the degree of their credibility and possible ways of interpreting them, which characterize historians' work, gives the audience the impression that historical writing is sloppy. Such reading experiences cannot provide motivation to undertake changes.<sup>20</sup>

Historians, as Pihlainen has noticed, however, attempt to link the meticulous reconstruction of facts with an attractive, coherent, clear and meaningful narrative. Nevertheless, the link between historical knowledge and meaningful narrative cannot be substantiated and serves only a "recreational" function, that is, it recreates the past to provide entertainment to the audience. These practices do not solve the problems of the present day apart from relieving boredom, providing an experience of nostalgia or satisfying consumption-driven curiosity. There is also a risk that they will result in voyeuristic performances that use the image of the other to build an impression of picturesqueness or exoticism.<sup>21</sup>

According to Pihlainen, it is worth arguing for the impotence of history and trying to avoid constructing "recreational" historiography. Pihlainen explains that by doing the opposite, that is, seeing history as a privileged discourse that can help us judge public affairs or solve social problems, we can give historical knowledge too much importance in situations where it is not justified. It is not worth resorting to historiography to judge political and social agendas. According to Pihlainen, it would simply be a shame if the question "what actually happened" dominated discussions about the consequences of our beliefs and actions. He also reminds us that past reality does not contain a message that is directed to us. Historiography, like other discourses, assigns meanings, meaningful messages to the subject which is researched. It uses the authority of history illegitimately when it offers it to society as lessons from the past.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, expert historical knowledge should not be used to assess statements

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Kalle Pihlainen, "The Distinction of History: On Valuing the Insularity of the Historical Past," *Rethinking History* 20, 3 (2016): 415. Pihlainen addresses similar issues in his book: Kalle Pihlainen, *The Work of History* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Pihlainen, *Distinction of History*, 417–418.

<sup>21</sup> Pihlainen, *Distinction of History*, 421–422.

<sup>22</sup> Pihlainen, *Distinction of History*, 420–421.

from the practical past. Pihlainen emphasizes that by referring to history, we can, for example, destroy a potentially progressive non-historiographic way of relating to the past by suggesting that factual relevance is more important than its social value.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, he proposes to historians a different tactic to question harmful memory or identity narratives that are in public circulation, which will be discussed later.

Pihlainen also has tried to answer the question: how to produce historiography in order to avoid assigning it unauthorized functions? In his opinion, the solution may lie in historians' rejection of the desire of being creative and reaching for an uncreative way of writing. The latter is proposed by Kenneth Goldsmith, an American literary critic.<sup>24</sup> Instead of creating original and innovative works, he proposes recycling of existing texts (he mentions William S. Burroughs, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Andy Warhol as model examples), which in relation to historiography would mean greater emphasis on sources and reduction of commentary and the framework of narrative, resulting in more cohesive and meaningful portrayal. He also suggests creating representations that are too complex, extensive and uninteresting (Pihlainen mentions Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* as a model). According to Pihlainen, this form will be able to modify the beliefs of readers regarding the possibility of obtaining specific truths, lessons and meanings from historical narratives. It will also pass on to them the task of assigning meaning to a historiographic work and making it coherent while reading it.<sup>25</sup>

The historiography suggested by Pihlainen may still be political and practical in a narrow sense, that is, it may serve as a warning that political ideas and actions justified by the knowledge that historians have produced are questionable. It would not offer solutions to practical problems, but remind one that they will definitely not be found in the past. As Pihlainen writes, "[t]his kind of history would not, then, be a teacher of life but a troublemaker".<sup>26</sup> He adds that history should not meet the expectations of readers who demand attractive and clear stories that contain strong moral lessons for the present day, but defy them. "[B]ecause of its generic commitment to factual detail, it already has a natural talent for this – for being boring, irrelevant, non-commercial".<sup>27</sup>

It is worth considering which of the approaches proposed here can be directly related to White's statements, and which are, to a greater extent, Pihlainen's proposals, inspired by the writings of the American theorist. I will draw attention to two points, starting with the aforementioned proposal for non-creative writing. As Pihlainen explains, it does not mean rejecting the linguistic turn and returning to the "old", less creative and less imaginative "hard" history. The aforementioned names of the twentieth-century writers and visual artist suggest that

<sup>23</sup> Pihlainen, *Distinction of History*, 420–421.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Pihlainen, *Distinction of History*, 423–427.

<sup>26</sup> Pihlainen, *Distinction of History*, 427–428.

<sup>27</sup> Pihlainen, *Distinction of History*, 427–428.

Pihlainen refers here to White's well-known proposal that historical writing should adopt modernist poetics to construct a representation of the past. When the former suggests boring and lengthy writing, and the latter indicates the "greater artistic integrity" and "poetic force of meaning"<sup>28</sup> of the projected historical narratives, paradoxically they speak of the same thing. Modernist prose is a coherent and poetic artistic endeavor, which, however, often questions itself, celebrates failure, exposes its own complexity, and plays with the expectations of the audience. The difference between the two theorists seems to be that White, unlike Pihlainen, did not recognize modernist potential in "ordinary" historical writing.<sup>29</sup>

The second issue is the question of how the reader and readership are framed in White's writings. In his comments, Pihlainen explores and extensively describes this issue, although White himself raised it rather indirectly and casually. I mentioned earlier the concepts of the death of the author and textualism introduced by White into the theory of history, which are related to structuralism and whose purpose were to empower the reader. This is in line with Pihlainen's interpretation, in which the openness and ambiguity of historiography activate and increase the reader's agency by entrusting them with the task of giving meaning to a text and drawing their own conclusions. An important element of White's critical practice, however — controlled by structuralist thinking — is recognizing the pressure of deep structures of historical imagination, linguistic expression or culture on presenting the past, and these compulsions also apply to readers. These are not thematized in White's statements. White used the division into the unconscious and conscious actions of the logic of historical imagination (especially in the 1970s), the mechanisms of realistic discourse and the content of the form (the 1980s and the 1990s).<sup>30</sup> However, according to White, the transition from ignorance to knowledge, from automatism to control, from complacency or naivety to criticality could, according to him, occur through progressive historiography. But how can the reader who is controlled by cultural constraints, profound regularities of linguistic utterance and political unconsciousness freely give meaning to the knowledge provided by ambiguous and open texts of historians, and independently draw conclusions and lessons from them for the future? If the recipient of a text is projected as a "prisoner of language" or a passive executor of the dictates of cultural coercion, it seems inconsistent to encourage them to build their own interpretations of the past. To entrust them with such a task would require relinquishing thinking about presenting the past with the help of the conscious and unconscious opposition.

---

<sup>28</sup> These are the phrases that White uses in a discussion with Dirk A. Moses in order to describe historical narratives that could effectively undermine socially harmful identity stories. Cf. White, *The Public Relevance*, 336.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Pihlainen, *Distinction of History*, 423–424.

<sup>30</sup> Ordered chronologically: White, *Metahistory*, passim; Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7, 1 (1980): 5–27; White, *Content of the Form*; Hayden White, "Getting Out of History. Jameson's Redemption of Narrative," in Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 142–168.

It seems that White was detaching himself from it in the 1980s, when he abandoned the search for the grammar of historical writing, and even more in the 1990s, when he began to use the concept of interpretation as a reconfiguration of its object in terms of figure and fulfillment in place of structural analysis. However, in the following years he exposed naivety of Primo Levi, who proclaimed the factuality (as opposed to fictional writing) and literalness of testimonial literature, he explained the relationship between politics and the sphere of the imagination using Sigmund Freud's theory of drives and Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Since around the 1980s, White remained the central figure of the theory of history, influencing the entire discipline despite its fragmented nature. In the opinion of Herman Paul, he would keep this position for many years to come and his writing would contribute to the intellectual framework for current and future discussions, including those concerning the autonomy of history.<sup>32</sup> White's efforts to sternly criticize the nineteenth-century remnants thwarting the potential of the discipline of history, and to emphasize the literary nature of historical representation, sometimes yielded less expected results. The use of, at first, structuralism for these practices and then poststructuralist concepts of "the death of the author" and textualism suggested views that freed historiography from its links with an author's biography and worldview, and with the social context in which a given work is produced. Using Foucault's description of the order of discourse brought about a picture of a strong rigor of the discipline of history, which, however, is not synonymous with the strong autonomy of history. The rules of the discipline are not anchored scholarly but politically. Finally, the division into the practical and historical past, discussed in a surprising way by Pihlainen, provides an interpretation of historians' fulfillment of their social obligations. It frees history from the duties imposed by the public and the rulers that pose a risk for its autonomy and exceed its possibilities. The proposed approach exposes the double uselessness of historiography: firstly, for solving important social problems and, secondly, as a tool of exercising power. At the same time, it entrusts it with a more modest role of a "troublemaker" who questions building the authority of political and social programs and legitimizing the actions of the rulers with the use of historical knowledge.

Translation Paweł Hamera

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Hayden White, "Figural Realism in Witness Literature," *parallax* 10, 1 (2004): 113–124; Hayden White, "Modern Politics and the Historical Imaginary," in *The Politics of Imagination*, ed. by Chiara Bottici, Benoît Challand (Abington: Birkbeck Law Press, 2011), 162–177.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Herman Paul, "A Loosely Knit Network: Philosophy of History After Hayden White," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 13, 1 (2019): 3–20.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The article is an extended and updated version of the text: "Hayden White i autonomia historii," in *Hayden White w Polsce: fakty, krytyka, recepcja*, ed. by Ewa Domańska, Edward Skibiński, Paweł Stróżyk (Krakow: Universitas, 2019), 223–236. The translation of the text was financed by the Faculty of History of the Jagiellonian University.

## BIBLIOGRAFIA

- Ahlskog, Jonas. "Michael Oakeshott and Hayden White on the Practical and the Historical Past." *Rethinking History* 20, 3 (2016): 375–394.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977.
- Chandler, James. "Introduction: Doctrines, Disciplines, Discourses, Departments." *Critical Inquiry* 35, 4 (2009): 729–746.
- Chandler, James. *The Fate of Disciplines*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Collingwood, Robin. *The Idea of History*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Domańska, Ewa. "Hayden White: szkoła buntu." *Tygodnik Powszechny* 11 (2010).
- Domańska, Ewa. "Historiografia wyzwolenia." In Hayden White, *Przeszłość praktyczna*, ed. by Ewa Domańska, 273–286. Kraków: Universitas, 2014.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Jakobson, Roman. "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." In *Style in Language*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok, 350–377. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960.
- Johnson, Peter. *Collingwood's The Idea of History. A Reader's Guide*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.
- Kleinberg, Ethan. "Hayden White: In Memoriam." *Historian* 80, 4 (2018): 691–704.
- La Greca, María Inés. "Hayden White and Joan W. Scott's Feminist History: The Practical past, the Political Present and an Open Future." *Rethinking History* 20, 3 (2016): 395–413.
- La Greca, María Inés. "Narrative Trouble, or Hayden White's Desire for a Progressive Historiography Refigured by Judith Butler's Performativity Theory." *Storia della Storiografia* 65, 1 (2014): 117–129.
- Lorenz, Chris. "It Takes Three to Tango: History between the «Practical» and the «Historical» Past." *Storia della Storiografia* 65, 1 (2014): 29–46.
- Mink, Louis O. "Autonomy of Historical Understanding." *History and Theory* 5, 1 (1966): 24–47.
- Muchowski, Jakub. *Polityka pisarstwa historycznego. Refleksja teoretyczna Haydena White'a*. Warszawa–Toruń: Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, 2015.
- Novick, Peter. *That Noble Dream. The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Paul, Herman. "A Loosely Knit Network: Philosophy of History After Hayden White." *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 13, 1 (2019): 3–20.
- Paul, Herman. *Hayden White. The Historical Imagination*. Cambridge–Malden, Polity Press: 2011.
- Pihlainen, Kalle. "The Distinction of History: On Valuing the Insularity of the Historical Past." *Rethinking History* 20, 3 (2016): 414–432.
- Pihlainen, Kalle. *The Work of History*. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Simon, Zoltán Boldizsár. "History Manifested: Making Sense of Unprecedented Change." *European Review of History* 22, 5 (2015): 819–834.

- Sklokin, Vladimir. "It Is Not So Much a Paradigm Shift As a Total Breakdown... A Conversation with Prof. Hayden White." *Historians*. 14 May 2012. <http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/intervyu/258-it-is-not-so-much-a-paradigm-shift-as-a-total-breakdown-a-conversation-with-prof-hayden-white> (accessed: 8.03.2019). Spiegel, Gabrielle M. „Above, about and beyond the Writing of History: A Retrospective View of Hayden White's Metahistory on the 40th Anniversary of Its Publication." *Rethinking History* 17, 4 (2013): 492–508.
- White, Hayden. "Afterword: Manifesto Time." In *Manifestos for History*, ed. by Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, Alun Munslow, 220–231. London-New York: Routledge, 2007.
- White, Hayden. "Context and the Text." In Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, 185–213. Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- White, Hayden. "Figural Realism in Witness Literature." *parallax* 10, 1 (2004): 113–124.
- White, Hayden. "Formalist and Contextualist Strategies in Historical Explanation." In Hayden White, *Figural Realism. Studies in Mimesis Effect*, 43–65. Baltimore–London: John Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- White, Hayden. "Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground." In Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, 230–260. Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- White, Hayden. "Foucault's Discourse: The Historiography of Anti-Humanism." In Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, 104–141. Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- White, Hayden. "Getting Out of History. Jameson's Redemption of Narrative." In Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, 142–168. Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- White, Hayden. "Historical Discourse and Literary Theory." In Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 75–96. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014.
- White, Hayden. "Literature and Social Action: Reflections on the Reflection Theory of Literary Art." *New Literary History* 11, 2 (2008): 363–380.
- White, Hayden. "Modern Politics and the Historical Imaginary." In *The Politics of Imagination*, ed. by Chiara Bottici, Benoît Challand, 162–177. Abington: Birkbeck Law Press, 2011.
- White, Hayden. "The Burden of History." In Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, 27–50. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- White, Hayden. "The Interpretation of Texts." In Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, ed. by Robert Doran, 208–222. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.
- White, Hayden. "The Politics of Historical Interpretation. Discipline and De-Sublimation." In Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, 58–82. Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- White, Hayden. "The Practical Past." In Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 3–24. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014.
- White, Hayden. "The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses." *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 333–338.
- White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1 (1980): 5–27.
- White, Hayden. *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

