

# Hayden White and the Problem of Historical Referentiality in Markan Narrative

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The work of Samuel Byrskog on the intersection of tradition formation with early Christian memory practices has been very influential in my own dealings with these questions. Particularly important was his attention to the crux issue of narrative formation and historical referentiality in the Gospels in his *Story as History – History as Story*, where he applied the powerful explanatory model of oral history to the formation of the tradition and to the writing projects of the evangelists. The tradition was formed of oral histories – that is, *stories, narratives* – grounded in eyewitness recollection, among other things attested by their residual local colour and incidental details. These materials in turn were “*narrativized* into a coherent story” by the evangelists, a cultural operation that was at the same time a programmatic hermeneutical enterprise.<sup>1</sup>

When I read this book a number of years ago, I remember thinking that the model needed to be taken further to confront more directly the deeply engrained view among scholars, which goes back to David Friedrich Strauss’s (1808–1874) trenchant analysis, that narrative formation in the Synoptics is such as to render their materials opaque to historical enquiry. In a 2018 essay Byrskog noted that “what the world or the experience might be like ‘before’ narratives construct and order it is one of the most

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1. Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, Tübingen 2000, 265.

controversial issues in the scholarly debate about narrative”.<sup>2</sup> This problem has taken its own particular shape within twentieth-century Gospel scholarship. Form criticism, which all but severed the formation of the tradition from memory, was followed by redaction criticism. Redaction criticism’s natal origins in form criticism were evident in its *Sammlung/Redaktion* binary: raw “tradition” on the one hand, the theologian-evangelist’s “redaction” on the other. This entailed distinguishing Mark’s redaction sharply from his tradition, and the three-way splitting of the whole into the setting of Mark’s community (redaction), the setting of the post-Easter primitive community (tradition), and the setting of the historical Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Its corollary was to make the evangelist Mark the principal agent for the theological and narrative formation of the tradition. Likewise entailed in the model was that Mark’s form-giving redaction of the tradition was a localized response to the social and historical crisis – the *Sitz im Leben* – of his community. That is to say, the referentiality of the Markan redaction was *contemporary*, not *historical*. In this schema the attention to the Markan “redaction” eclipses the Markan “tradition”. The latter is of interest only to the extent that it constitutes the *prima materia* that receives the imprint of Markan theology.

Narrative criticism of the Gospel of Mark is both successor to redaction criticism and its offspring. It shifts from Mark as theologian to Mark as a narrative artificer. It is an effort to overcome redaction criticism’s untenable bifurcation between Mark’s redaction and his tradition. But like its forebear redaction criticism, narrative criticism is one-dimensionally contemporizing. And where the Mark of redaction criticism is an autonomous theological genius, the Mark of narrative criticism is an autonomous literary genius. Attention to historical referentiality and to the history of the tradition is marginalized by the method. The Markan tradition is of interest only to the extent that it is subsumed to the author’s narrative project, which for its part is aimed at an “ideal audience” that still roughly corresponds, however, to the “Markan community” familiar from redaction criticism. The effect is to turn Mark’s project into a kind of narrative encoding of the contemporary realities of the Markan community, as for instance in this striking passage from David M. Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie’s pioneering work on narrative criticism:

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2. Samuel Byrskog, “Memory and Narrative – and Time: Towards a Hermeneutics of Memory”, *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 16 (2018), 110, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-01602003>.

3. Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies in the Redaction History of the Gospel*, Nashville, TN 1969, 28–29, 89–94.

Imagine the hearers of Mark living in a village in northern Galilee that had already been devastated by Roman armies [...] Now imagine how much the announcement of “good news”, the declaration of an “anointed one” who was “son of God”, the preparation of the “way” of the “Lord”, the announcement of the arrival of the “empire” of *God* [...] Imagine how all of this may have echoed and yet contrasted with the entrance of the Roman armies into Palestine from the north [...] By contrast, the Markan Gospel portrays Jesus waging a campaign in Galilee also, but a campaign against Satan and other manifestations of evil [...] as a means to bring restoration and healing – driving out demons where the Romans had acted like demons, restoring wholeness where the Romans had maimed [...] providing bread where the Romans had burned the supplies and fields of grain, and calming storms on the Sea of Galilee that the Romans had turned blood-red [...] The journey to Jerusalem continues to provide a contrast to Roman conquest. Along that journey, Jesus teaches that disciples are not to lord it over anyone “as the Gentile nations do”.<sup>4</sup>

It similarly follows from the narrative-critical centring of Mark’s autonomous authorial agency that the principal catalyzers of the narrative, and the principal determinants of its narrative referents, will be contemporary events.

Gospel narrative criticism has strong ties to modern literary criticism, which construes the text as an auto-semantic entity that constitutes an internal narrative world. This even more fundamentally precludes attention to the question of historical referentiality.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary literary theory, says Paul Ricœur (1913–2005), “whether structuralist or not [...] proclaims the closure on themselves of narrative and rhetorical configurations and announces the exclusion of any extralinguistic referent”.<sup>6</sup> The origins of this theoretical stance, he explains, lie in the extension of Saussurean linguistics – the play of “the signifier and the signified, excluding any referent” – to whole texts, that is, “the rejection of a referential dimension by structuralist orthodoxy”. While not necessarily problematic for fictional texts, it is inadequate for narrative works (like Mark) with an evident intentionality towards historical referentiality, that is, to a world external to the text.<sup>7</sup>

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4. David M. Rhoads, Joanna Dewey & Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, Minneapolis, MN 2012, 149, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22nm9t2>.

5. Cilliers Breytenbach, *The Gospel According to Mark as Episodic Narrative*, Leiden 2021, 147–148, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004443754>.

6. Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago 2004, 260.

7. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 247–248.

Werner H. Kelber points out that the model of Mark the authorial mastermind is post-Gutenberg, in other words that “the author [is] a solitary genius who self-consciously and almost single-handedly composes texts”.<sup>8</sup> Kelber makes this comment in his polemic against Richard A. Burridge’s taxonomic *bios* classification for the genre of the Gospels and its concomitant centring of the evangelist’s autonomous literary agency (as on the Greco-Roman model).<sup>9</sup> Helen Bond’s 2020 application of Burridge’s *bios* genre designation as the paradigm for the origins of the Gospel of Mark is instructive in this regard. She finds herself in the same boat as narrative critics like Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, that is, compelled to identify features of the Markan materials that signal their pre-literary origins as the effects of the evangelist’s style and rhetoric. The local colour and realism in various of Mark’s materials are due not to a “residual orality” but to Mark’s talent for “telling a good story”. The oral-like simplicity and substandard literary quality is a deliberate authorial effect, a “tailor[ing] of his prose to the [simple, uneducated] audience, crafting his account in [...] a vibrant and entertaining manner”, in accord with the rhetorical handbooks’ recommendation to strive for “appropriateness”, that is, of a composition to its audience.<sup>10</sup>

Bond’s difficulty is that her media assumptions preclude her from accounting for the oral-written interface. She associates the attention to orality with the extremism in contemporary Gospel scholarship of the sort that would dissolve Synoptic writing into orality. She therefore rejects the “oral-derived” model for Markan origins out of hand. This leaves her unable to reconcile the written, literary dimension of the Gospel of Mark with the pre-literary origins of its materials. In consequence, she moves completely to the literary pole. This leads her to claim that the chreic forms of the Markan materials – their pithiness, their economy, their minimalist circumstantial detail – are not cognitive strategies for memory-based circulation but artifacts of the evangelist’s literary craft, radically pruning back details in order to achieve a desired rhetorical focus upon the hero of the exemplary *bios*.<sup>11</sup> The existence of *chreia* compilations, however, both Greco-Roman and rabbinic, attests to the *chreia*’s existence as a form calibrated for oral,

8. Werner H. Kelber, “On Mastering Genre”, in Robert Matthew Calhoun, David P. Moessner & Tobias Nicklas (eds.), *Modern and Ancient Literary Criticism of the Gospels: Continuing the Debate on Gospel Genre(s)*, Tübingen 2020, 71.

9. Burridge’s *bios* theory is currently in retreat owing to developments in genre theory. See the various essays (in addition to Kelber’s) in Robert Matthew Calhoun, David P. Moessner & Tobias Nicklas (eds.), *Modern and Ancient Literary Criticism of the Gospels: Continuing the Debate on Gospel Genre(s)*, Tübingen 2020.

10. Helen K. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark’s Gospel*, Grand Rapids, MI 2020, 88–89.

11. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus*, 105–107.

memory-based transmission of essential cultural information.<sup>12</sup> Bond acknowledges that Mark received (and worked up into chreic forms) a body of pre-Markan materials. But her *bios* authorial model and dismissal of the oral-traditional media factor put her in the bind of being unable to be clear about the modes in which those “disparate sources and collective memories”, this “chaos of tradition”, existed. She refers to “collective memories”, but early Christian memory is not transmittable apart from some nexus with tradition-formation.<sup>13</sup>

A way out of this narrative-critical impasse seems initially to be signalled by Sandra Huebenthal in her superb narrative-critical work, *Reading the Gospel of Mark as a Text from Collective Memory*. Huebenthal breaks through the method’s closure to the history of the tradition by identifying the Markan *apophthegma* tradition with the category “social memory” within her tripartite schema *social memory, collective memory, cultural memory*. By social memory she means the face-to-face, anecdotal circulation of recollections among first-generation Christians. In this era, early Christian narrative consciousness is limited to the episodic and the apophthegmatic. This primitive Christian social memory is temporally limited, fading with the generational cohort of its living carriers. This crisis precipitates the formation of a collective memory, that is, the convergence on a more unitary narrative identity in the medium of writing. This watershed narrative project is the Gospel of Mark.<sup>14</sup>

Huebenthal’s adducing of memory theory to illuminate the Markan narrative enterprise might seem to bring with it a breakthrough in the historical referentiality question. But she insists, quite emphatically, that this is not the case. So incisive is this new Markan point of departure, so drastic the evangelist’s narrative “overwriting” of the dispersed episodic tradition, so urgent the generational crisis of cultural identity formation that is driving the narrative project, that making determinations of historical referentiality in the Markan materials is bound to be an unpropitious exercise. Mark as a narrative formation in service of a cultural identity project gives us “no insight into the question of what the events remembered in these texts

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12. See John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections*, Philadelphia, PA 1987, 306–316, and for rabbinic *chreias*, or “case stories”, Catherine Hezser, “Orality, Textuality, and Memory in the Transmission of Rabbinic Legal Narratives”, in Klaus-Peter Adam, Friedrich Avemarie & Nili Wazana (eds.), *Law and Narrative in the Bible and in Other Neighbouring Ancient Cultures*, Tübingen 2012, 279–295. See also Loveday Alexander, “Memory and Tradition in the Hellenistic Schools”, in Werner H. Kelber & Samuel Byrskog (eds.), *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives*, Waco, TX 2009, 113–153.

13. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus*, 108–112, 154, 226, 257.

14. Sandra Huebenthal, *Reading Mark’s Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory*, Grand Rapids, MI 2020, 167–172.

actually looked like”.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, “there is no way behind the current text; the current version is the only accessible version and reflects the narratively formed identity of the groups at that point in time, no matter what the history of the tradition was like”.<sup>16</sup> If this were simply a claim that the narrative configuration and forms of Mark and the Markan materials present critical historiography with formidable difficulties, it would be hard to object. But taking Jan Assmann’s dictum at its face value – “one needs to be clear about this: memory has nothing to do with historical enquiry” – she in effect claims that Markan narrative is not historiographically tractable.<sup>17</sup>

Eve-Marie Becker’s solution is to approach Mark as a specimen of Greco-Roman historiographical genres, that is, as an authorially-conceived literary narrative oriented to historical events. Mark has at his disposal oral and written traditions which, in accord with the procedures of ancient historians, he perhaps supplements with personal autopsy, including engaging with eyewitnesses and informants.<sup>18</sup> Becker’s is a powerful model that seems to offer us a solution to the problem of narrative formation and historical referentiality in Mark’s Gospel. Different from redaction-critical and narrative-critical approaches, it takes full cognizance of the evangelist’s historical intentionality, that Mark intends to write about the real past, that the work has a factual dimension, that actual human events perceived to “have caused change and motion” provide the grist for Mark’s narrativizing authorial project.<sup>19</sup>

For us the key question, however, is how Becker conceives the intersection of this source material with Mark’s narrativizing, literary activity. Disconnected events, the data, the collected knowledge of the past, she says, in that raw state do not constitute history. For this they require narrativization by the historian. This is a matter of their literary *emplotment*, which includes arrangement in a causally-connected sequence. In Becker’s view this means that history-writing inherently involves *fictionalization*. Though an implication of history writing *per se*, this is particularly evident in ancient historiography, with its blurring of historical and mythical elements, as in

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15. Huebenthal, *Reading Mark’s Gospel*, 174.

16. Huebenthal, *Reading Mark’s Gospel*, 140.

17. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich 2005, 77. Assmann’s point in context, however, is that the social, cultural function of a commemorative narrative – the roles that the Masada narrative and the Holocaust narrative play in contemporary Israeli society – is quite different from the approaches to these same events taken by the critical historian.

18. Eve-Marie Becker, *The Birth of Christian History: Memory and Time from Mark to Luke-Acts*, New Haven, CT 2017, 39, 59.

19. Becker, *The Birth of Christian History*, 87.

the Gospel of Mark.<sup>20</sup> Becker's promising model therefore still works with a schematic binary between Mark's raw historical source materials on the one hand and his authorial, meaning-bestowing imposition of a narrative emplotment upon them on the other. In this respect it does not differ from redaction-critical and narrative-critical approaches.

Becker's model (and to no small extent Huebenthal's) has strong affinities to Hayden White's (1928–2018) model for narrative historiography. As such it is vulnerable to critiques that have been directed at White's model. It follows that it is through the critique of White that we can get new leverage on the question of historical referentiality in Markan narrative formations.

### Hayden White on Narration and History

White famously blurs – some might say erases – the line between literary fiction writing and history writing. This is because any given field of historical data is receptive to plural narrative and hence plural interpretative emplotments. Historical enquiry, White claims, is not a matter of the uncovering and elucidation of the implicit significance of past events or entities, and of bringing to light their causal relationships. Rather, historical meaning, touted by the narrating historian as “what really happened”, is *created*, first, by the historian's pre-configuration, or pre-constitution, of a field of raw historical data, which White says do not come pre-configured, into a kind of linguistic field defining possible syntactic relationships among entities (for example agents and causes, acts and effects), and then second, by the choice of particular narrative tropes (White appropriates Northrop Frye's [1912–1991] “theory of fictions” taxonomy of Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, Satire) to emplot the entities in that field into an ideologically-laden, coherence- and meaning-bestowing story.<sup>21</sup> Here, for example, White describes the Enlightenment historiography of the *philosophes*:

Dominated by a conception of rationalism derived from the (Newtonian) physical sciences, the *philosophes* approached the historical field as a ground of cause-effect relationships, the causes in question being generally conceived to be the forces of reason and unreason, the effects of which were generally conceived to be enlightened men on the one hand and superstitious or ignorant men on the other. The “lexical” elements of this system were men, acting as individuals and as groups, who were “grammatically” classifiable into the major categories of superstitious or irrational values and carriers of enlightened or rational

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20. Becker, *The Birth of Christian History*, 86–90.

21. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, MD 1973, 6–7, 30–35, 426–432.

ones. The “syntax” of relationships by which these two classes of historical phenomena were bound together was that of the unremitting conflict of opposites; and the (semantic) meaning of this conflict was nothing but the triumph of the latter over the former, or the reverse.<sup>22</sup>

A different mode of pre-figuration and choice of a different syntax of narrative emplotment would determine a different meaning-interpretation of the historical data. The outcome is equally coherent but unreconcilable narrative and moral interpretations of the same data.

For our purposes the point is that White regards narrative emplotment as a historian’s *imposition* upon past events that taken in themselves constitute nothing more than “mere sequence”, an “ephemeral flow of events”, awaiting the historian’s impress of narrativity.<sup>23</sup> The historian’s narrative emplotment is at the same time an imposition of meaning upon this “mere sequence”, and more precisely a moral meaning, which is presented by the mask of narrativization as the true moral meaning of events. “This is why”, White says, “the plot of a historical narrative [...] has to be presented as ‘found’ in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques.”<sup>24</sup> What narrative history-writing in fact amounts to is an ideological superstructure imposed upon historical events in pursuit of a particular social and political agenda. White further alleges that there is no non-ideological ethical vantage point from which to adjudicate among conflicting moral (that is, narrative) interpretations of a given sequence of events. Ethical stances are not to be distinguished from ideological stances, for the latter “have their origins in ethical conceptions”.<sup>25</sup> White thus denies the possibility of reason-grounded moral evaluation and adjudication among the different social agendas that can drive narrative interpretations of a given sequence of events, and rejects the possibility of critique of what Christopher R. Browning refers to as “ideological deformation” of historical narrative.<sup>26</sup>

### Critique of White’s Historical Narratology

Ricœur critically probes White’s historical narratology at the point of its juncture with French literary criticism of the sort characterized by the

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22. White, *Metahistory*, 65.

23. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore, MD 1987, 3–4, 22–25.

24. White, *The Content of the Form*, 21.

25. White, *Metahistory*, 26–27, also 21, 40.

26. Christopher R. Browning, “German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, and Historical Reconstruction: Writing Perpetrator History from Postwar Testimony”, in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, Cambridge, MA 1992, 32.



extension of Saussurean linguistics, with its methodological “exclusion of the [external] referent from the linguistic field”, to the “semiotics of narrative”. White followed Roland Barthes (1915–1980) in committing the “category mistake” of extending this model to all forms of narration, and thus to historiographical narrative, triumphantly exposing its “referential illusion”.<sup>27</sup> To be sure, Ricœur says, “the fictional and the historical narrative participate in the same narrative structures”, narrative emplotment in both cases requires exercise of the imaginative faculty, and both are representational. But the error lies in the failure “to specify the referential moment that distinguishes history [writing] from fiction”, that is to say, its referential intention towards a real past, external to the text, and towards the truth of the past, or put differently, its representational intention of faithfulness to the past.<sup>28</sup> This category distinction is secured by the grounding of historiographical narrative in *memory* and the various ways – eyewitness, documentary, and otherwise – in which that memory of the past is mediated to the writer. The past, Ricœur says, “prolongs its effects at the core of the [narrative] representation”, notwithstanding the ultimate inadequacy of any narrative representation in the face of “the demand for truth arising from the heart of lived history”.<sup>29</sup>

Ricœur’s account of historical narratology as truth-seeking is refreshing and bracing. The point at which White’s assertion of the moral undecidability of different narrative emplotments and interpretations really gets mired down in difficulties is in the encounter with that “mere sequence” of past events known as the Holocaust. A colloquium convened in 1992, the proceedings of which were published as *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, brought together Hayden White and Holocaust historians critical of his narrative historiography. Imagine, Saul Friedlander says in his Introduction,

what would have happened if the Nazis had won the war? No doubt there would have been a plethora of pastoral emplotments of life in the Third Reich and of comic emplotments of the disappearance of its victims, mainly the Jews. How [...] would White [...] define any epistemological criterion for refuting a comic interpretation of these events?<sup>30</sup>

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27. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 247–250.

28. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 253–254. See also Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, Chicago 1984, 64.

29. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 260.

30. Saul Friedlander, “Introduction”, in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, Cambridge, MA 1992, 10.

White tries to neutralize the threat to his theory by pleading that the Holocaust lies beyond any adequate narrative representation and therefore constitutes a special case.<sup>31</sup> But even this evasion amounts to a concession that past events contain an imperative for referential and moral truth in the modes of their narrative representation. In Ricœur's words, the Holocaust is the diagnostic case of "a request, a demand to be spoken of, represented, arising from the very heart of the event".<sup>32</sup>

We saw that in White's schema, meaning – moral meaning in particular – is an imposition upon a sequence of events by virtue of the narrative historian's emplotment of that sequence into a story. The effect is to create the illusion that a moral meaning, a particular moral order, is immanent in those events; that it has been "found" in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques.<sup>33</sup> That a given narrative emplotment is a construction of the narrating historian's moral programme can be readily acknowledged. But White's model fails to recognize that historical events are charged with moral and cultural meanings with their occurrence. Historical existence is a moral existence, and human agency is always positioned within a network of moral coordinates and transected on all points by a cultural semiotic. It would therefore be more accurate to say that narrative order, corresponding in emplotted form to a narrator's moral conception, *supervenes* upon the sequence of already morally charged and culturally signified events that constitute the narrator's material.<sup>34</sup>

For our purposes, this allows us to reconceive the relationship of the Markan narrative emplotment to the Markan materials in terms of a continuity rather than as a sharp discontinuity. To illustrate: White takes note of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770–1831) observation that an "intimate relationship [...] exists between law, historicity, and narrativity". That is to say, law constitutes a social system, which is the framework for the constitution of a subject who could be the subject of a narrative. Noting "the frequency with which narrativity [...] presupposes the existence of a legal system against which or on behalf of which the typical agents of a narrative account militate", White declares that "the more historically self-conscious the writer of any form of historiography, the more the question of the social

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31. Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth", in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, Cambridge, MA 1992, 37, 54.

32. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 254.

33. White, *The Content of the Form*, 20–21.

34. I use the term "supervenes" here in the sense of its intransitive use in philosophy, as in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Of a quality or property: to be dependent *on* (or *upon*) a further underlying quality or property for its existence; to be present by virtue of the presence of other specified attributes."

system and the law that sustains it, the authority of this law and its justification, and threats to this law occupy his attention”.<sup>35</sup> This is certainly borne out by the Markan narrative, in which the struggle over law and authority is a principal formative element in the evangelist’s emplotment. But the historical Jesus is already constituted as a subject and agent within a social and cultural matrix defined by Jewish law, a matrix destabilized, moreover, by corollary conflicts over authority and legitimacy.

The implications can be further elaborated. For White it is axiomatic that past events come to the narrating historian as unnarrativized fodder. “Real events”, he says, “do not offer themselves as stories”, which is why “their narrativization is so difficult.”<sup>36</sup> Rhetorically he asks: “Does the world [...] ever really come to us as already narrativized, already ‘speaking itself’ from beyond the horizon of our capacity to make sense of it?”<sup>37</sup> To which we answer, in fact yes, it does: though awaiting narrative emplotment, the past comes to the narrating historian already bearing a narrative complexion. The only link to the past is memory. The historian’s materials in the final analysis are memory materials. Memories take cognitive form in narrative patterns, a cognitive process deeply networked, moreover, into an encompassing matrix of cultural narrative patterns and topoi.<sup>38</sup> Against White’s “radical relativism” this entails, Martin Jay points out, that one “acknowledge the existence of formed content in the narrations the historical actors or victims themselves have produced, and use them as a check on the absolute license of the historian to emplot the past in an entirely capricious way”.<sup>39</sup>

But not only are cultural narrative patterns and corollary cultural symbol systems – which include a moral order – a principal factor in the shaping of memories of historical events. They are formative of the historical actors themselves, on the one hand cognitively as subjects, and on the other hand providing the coordinates for their exercise of agency within their cultural sphere, which encompasses its social, legal, and political dimensions. Conversely, they are the cognitive categories for the face-to-face perception and reaction to a historical agent (like Jesus) by his or her contemporaries; for the agent’s cultural and social “readability”. Historical action is not pre-narrative, as White thinks. It is constitutively formed by cultural scripts and patterns of signification. Again Martin Jay:

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35. White, *The Content of the Form*, 13–14.

36. White, *The Content of the Form*, 3–4.

37. White, *The Content of the Form*, 24–25.

38. A point established definitively in Byrskog, “Memory and Narrative”, 119–123.

39. Martin Jay, “Of Plots, Witnesses, and Judgements”, in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, Cambridge, MA 1992, 99–100.

The factual record is not [...] entirely prior to its linguistic mediation, or indeed its figural signification. What distinguishes the events and facts that later historians reconstruct is precisely their being often already inflected with narrative meaning for those who initiate or suffer them in their own lives [...] There is, in other words, virtually no historical content that is linguistically unmediated and utterly bereft of meaning, waiting around for the later historian to emplot it in arbitrary ways.<sup>40</sup>

To draw the further implication: the narrative inflection is itself an irreducible element of the historical data, aborigine with the historical events and the historical *dramatis personae*.

We return to our point that the Markan narrative supervenes upon its already narratively prefigured and culturally signified materials.<sup>41</sup> But here White – and Gospel narrative critics – must be given their due: a non-trivial disjunction exists between Mark’s narrative emplotment and his narratively-inflected materials. Taken in aggregate, the latter lack narrative coherence and narrative closure – emplotment into a story that constitutes its own interconnected narrative world and exploits the hermeneutical possibilities thereby opened up. This requires the reflective work of the narrating evangelist. Far from being just a technical project, as Huebenthal rightly argued it amounts to a cultural identity enterprise of far-reaching significance, one enabled by the programmatic conversion of primitive Christianity’s formative tradition into the written medium with its property of material extension.

But one still runs up against the problem of divergent narrative representations of the same historical realities, or as Hayden White put it, “the consistent elaboration of a number of equally comprehensive and plausible, yet mutually exclusive conceptions of the same sets of events”.<sup>42</sup> Along with Martin Jay, we can readily affirm with White that any given field of events can bear plural narrative interpretations. In fact, Jay says, “no uniform meaning can be assumed to have existed for all the participants in historical events”. Interpretative representations are also profoundly affected by historical, social, and cultural factors in the narrating historian’s own present, and by the historian’s historically-distanced perspective upon the past.<sup>43</sup>

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40. Jay, “Of Plots, Witnesses, and Judgments”, 98–99.

41. On this point likewise Byrskog, “Memory and Narrative”, 112: “The experience of the Jesus event had an intrinsic narrative structure before it was formulated narratively in memory and writing.”

42. White, *Metahistory*, 40–41, 431–432.

43. Jay, “Of Plots, Witnesses, and Judgments”, 104.

We are therefore left with the irreducible plurality of interpretative narrative emplotments. In this connection an openness to the merits of different narrative interpretations remains essential. A historical narrative is a particular representation of reality, not reality itself. “Reality is an elusive notion”, Funkenstein says. “Every narrative is, in its way, an exercise in ‘worldmaking’.” But, he continues, “it is not arbitrary”.<sup>44</sup> That is, against White’s claim to the contrary, rationally grounded discrimination among plural narrative accounts is possible. It is indeed possible to rank narrative representations by their epistemological virtues and to pass ethical judgements on divergent moral interpretations of historical events. Moral meaning for White is an imposition “on what in reality is a chaotic, incoherent, meaningless series of events” by the narrating historian, by virtue of emplotment.<sup>45</sup> But each historical event, every exercise of human historical agency, occurs within a cultural *Lebenswelt*, through which a moral order is densely woven. The exercise of historical agency already bears a moral complexion, a set of moral commitments, as an indelible feature of its historical being. We can embrace White’s point that narrative interpretations of the moral significance of events will be plural, even conflicting. We can even go further to make evaluative plurality contemporaneous with the occurrence of the events.

But this does not rule out the capacity for passing moral judgements on the truth of a narrative representation. White’s claim to the contrary is a function of his belief that no “extra-ideological” position exists from which to render judgements among plural narrative representations. The ideological and political positions from which narrating historians operate “have their origins in ethical considerations, and the assumption of a given epistemological position would itself represent only another ethical choice”.<sup>46</sup> This moral relativism, White’s collapsing of ethical stance into ideological stance, his making truth in ethical evaluation a mask on the ideological face, again finds its contradiction in narrations of the Holocaust, which is not the exception White claims it to be but the paradigm for innumerable other cases – the Soviet gulag, the Katyn Forest massacre, the Cambodian killing fields, and so forth *ad infinitum*.

## Conclusion

We have only been able to make a few gestures at how critiques of Hayden White’s model for narrative history-writing give us leverage on the problem of memory, narrative, and historical referentiality in the Gospel of Mark.

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44. Amos Funkenstein, “History, Counterhistory, and Narrative”, in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, Cambridge, MA 1992, 79.

45. Browning’s summary of White’s view in Browning, “German Memory”, 30.

46. White, *Metahistory*, 26.

Byrskog has taken the measure of the formidable difficulties that are nevertheless involved, and he in fact remains pessimistic about being able to move methodologically from Markan narrative formations to critical projects of historical reconstruction. There is truth in the maxim that the “past is always the remembered past”.<sup>47</sup> But the critiques of White surveyed above have called into question any categorically binary distinctions between historical reality and its narrative representations, between supposedly objectively factual history and the moral experience of history in memory. Not only are narrative representations of history grounded in memory; they are distinguished by a referential intention towards a real past, towards the truth of the past.<sup>48</sup> To return to Ricœur’s words: The past “prolongs its effects at the core of the [narrative] representation”, notwithstanding the ultimate inadequacy of any narrative representation in the face of “the demand for truth arising from the heart of lived history”.<sup>49</sup> We thus find ourselves in a position to take up anew Samuel Byrskog’s inquiry into how “history becomes story”.<sup>50</sup> ▲

#### SUMMARY

In his *Story as History – History as Story*, Byrskog applied the powerful explanatory model of oral history to the formation of the tradition and to the narrative projects of the evangelists. The model needs to be taken further to confront the view among Gospel narrative critics that narrative formation in the Gospel of Mark is such as to render its materials opaque to historical enquiry. Narrative criticism works with a schematic binary between Mark’s raw historical source materials on the one hand and his meaning-bestowing imposition of a narrative emplotment upon them on the other. This has strong affinities to Hayden White’s model for narrative history-writing. White regards narrative emplotment as the historian’s imposition upon past events that taken in themselves constitute nothing more than an “ephemeral flow of events”, awaiting the historian’s impress of narrativity. Moral meaning is an ideological imposition upon a sequence of events by virtue of the narrative historian’s emplotment of that sequence into a story. Powerful critiques of White by Paul Ricœur and Holocaust historians have called into question schematic distinctions between historical reality and its narrative representations. Not only are narrative representations grounded in memory; they are distinguished by a referential intention towards a real past.

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47. Byrskog, “Memory and Narrative”, 65.

48. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 253–254.

49. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 260.

50. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 255.