Łukasz M. Michalski
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Silesia in Katowice
 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2863-289X

Metahistory – Vicissitudes and Humanistic Capacity of the Concept

Abstract: Is the term metahistory a repetition of the Aristotelian gesture of naming metaphysics? In 2023, half a century passes since the first publication of Hayden White's famous book *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. However, this classic, fairly well-known work – as well as its criticism – did not give life to the term metahistory, which in the horizon of research terms is enjoyed, for example, by metaphysics.

In these considerations, I do not mean sentimental reminding about a term that would be valuable today for the sole reason that it once existed. Rather, it is an attempt to think about the path of enriching (re)thinking of the historical imagination – the latter, I believe, is the key to resisting the contemporary crises and impasses of today's humanities.

Keywords: metahistory, philosophy of history, theory of historiography, travelling concepts, Hayden White, war in Ukraine

> *'Truth' is the name of the pursuit of scholarship and science,*
> *and it epitomizes in particular the discipline of history.*
> – Mieke Bal, "Deliver Us from A-Historicism:
> Metahistory for Non-Historians"[1]

Introduction

Categories have their moments of dictionary glory. They become fashionable, obligatory due to the intertwining of mechanisms of knowledge and power, which are popular for other reasons, often random. They also have times of oblivion, periods of inadequacy to the language of the new times. There are lost concepts (as a matter of fact, even entire archives and libraries can be lost). They experience periods of decline, and often they fail to survive such a period – if such is the case they disappear. At the same time, concepts are the basic building blocks of thinking about the world and a significant part of the academic 'production'

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1. Mieke Bal, "Deliver Us from A-Historicism: Metahistory for Non-Historians," in *Philosophy of History after Hayden White*, ed. Robert Doran (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 67.

describes the vicissitudes of terms within the humanities. Consideration of the provenance of words and their ability to describe the world is an inexhaustible research necessity. In this text, I would also like to bring it up. Here I want to examine the vicissitudes of one of the important and at the same time ephemeral and semantically unstable words of the humanities. It is metahistory. All this in order to consider the nature and potential of the presence of this term in the dictionary of today's humanities, as well as asking about the educational potential of the concept.

Whether it was worth undertaking these analyses, it will be possible to consider only at the end of them, but their very beginning can be justified, for instance, by the potential belonging of metahistory to the group of general terms – therefore important as they are superior in the pool of terms of disciplines that deal with the study of the past. Moreover, there is another reason for initiating these considerations. When Paul Herman in a text published in 2015 justifies his interest in metahistory, he points that we are dealing here with a category which "is perhaps best known as the title word of what has become the most influential work in historical theory since Collingwood's *The Idea of History*"[2] (thus from 1946). The year 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of the first issue of the famous *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* by Hayden White, that influential work Herman wrote about. Celebrating the anniversary of its editions is almost a tradition and also a good occasion to reflect on the current status of metahistory. The more so because, while White's book enjoys a tremendous amount of comets and studies, metahistory itself is quite the opposite. The term is not a categorical giant in the humanities, does not have a rich bibliography, relatively little is said about it and the academic popularity of White's book did not change that either. It did not have a career similar to metaphysics, and yet in comparison with physics, history seems no less worthy of the "meta" perspective.

In further analyses, I recall the clues leading to the likely origins of the concept, I analyse (*close reading* strategy) important classical attempts to introduce it to the 'galas' of humanistic terminology and the levels of criticism of these intentions. Furthermore, using the idea of *travelling concepts*, thus starting from the position proposed by Mieke Bal, I want to sketchily consider the 'capacity' of the term.

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In the literature, the concept of metahistory is vague, it breaks down into the question of translation. I expect that the usurpation that I am making is clear. It is not possible to agree on metahistory terms in different languages. Here, metahistory

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2. Paul Herman, "Metahistory: Notes Towards a Genealogy," *Práticas da História* 1 (2015): 20–21.

is considered only in its Anglo-Saxon ancestry (with its Greek roots). Others are, for example, the vicissitudes of the German term "die Metageschichte" – only seemingly possible to be automatically translated into "metahistory" (it should be linked with the theory rather than the philosophy of history); traces of it can be found in the texts of theologians and philosophers of the 1920s and, for example, in works of an important German researcher – Jörn Rüsen.[3]

1951. Investigation

We do not find the term metahistory until the 20th century, although we most likely struggle with fantasizing conjectures about lost ancient theses and treatises that used them before. Without succumbing to such conjectures, let us stick to what is scientifically guaranteed. "The word 'metahistory' needs defining because it has become current only recently," wrote Arnold Toynbee in a text from 1961,[4] and we can treat this diagnosis as the first landmark in our search for the sprouting sense of the term. Let us briefly consider the first meanings that texts of the time attribute to metahistory. This will allow us to outline the field of possible definitions that its history offers us to understand metahistory.

Peter Burke, in an excellent text written around Hayden White's *Metahistory*, explains the origin of the book's title category.[5] It would have been drawn from the theoretical and literary writings of the Canadian Northrop Frye, from which White made considerable use in his deliberations. Frye himself was to borrow the term from a short text published in 1951 by another Canadian thinker and historian, Frank H. Underhill.[6] Importantly, this paper is devoted to *A Study of History,* at that time still unfinished (six out of twelve volumes were published) and the famous work of Arnold Toynbee, who was proclaimed, among others, by Underhill "the most fashionable historian of our day" and elsewhere "one of the men of genius of our age."[7]

The very title of the paper describes Toynbee as a metahistorian. Anyway, it is significant that the origins of the term metahistory are related to the analysis of a particular researcher's strategy. So metahistory was not invented as some theoretical attitude that only needs to be dealt with, but the word has already been

3. See: Jörn Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning. A Theory of Historical Studies*, trans. Diane Kerns and Katie Digan (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017).

4. Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History,* 12: *Reconsederations* (London–New York–Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1964), 227.

5. Peter Burke, "Metahistory: Before and After," *Rethinking History* 17, no. 4 (2013): 437–447.

6. Frank H. Underhill, "Arnold Toynbee, Metahistorian," *The Canadian Historical Review* 32, no. 3 (1951): 201–219.

7. Underhill, "Arnold Toynbee," 201, 218.

used to refer to the advanced scientific practice of specific researchers of the past. At that time, the debates were more often about metahistorians (conceived as a given type of historians or just non-historians), than about metahistory as such (e.g., understood as a discipline or a field of knowledge). That is why Peter Burke will precisely write about Underhill that he is "who coined the term 'metahistory,' or more exactly, 'metahistorian.'"[8]

In his review, Underhill briefly but several times explained what he meant by metahistory. He wrote inter alia about the metahistorical task undertaken by Toynbee, vaguely defined as "to investigate *sub specie temporis* the mystery of the universe."[9] Elsewhere, he pointed out that Toynbee resits the danger of falling into the determinism of historical cycles "by soaring above history to become a metahistorian, a prophet, a theologian, telling us, that our merely human, mundane civilizations do not represent the end of history but that they serve only as a means to produce a higher form of society, a supra-terrestrial society, a City of God."[10] The play on this history-metahistory relationship can be also seen, when Underhill states that analysing *The Study of History* one can discern two versions of Toynbee-metahistory. First, "in the sense that he has been fitting the whole complex content of past human experience into a fairly rigid universal pattern, and that his pattern becomes definitely deterministic from the moment that a civilization suffers a breakdown and enters into the phase of disintegration"[11]; and the second, when he becomes "a metahistorian in a much more fundamental sense. He is leading up to what he considers the culminating and most significant event in history, and he abandons the role of historian completely for that of theologian."[12] Using the comparisons of Underhill himself, it can be concluded that in the first case Toynbee can be called a modern Thucydides – in the second, the new St. Augustine.

Let us try to formulate a working definition of metahistory based on the Underhill's text. Metahistory would therefore be a kind of reflection which, based on historical knowledge, pursues patterns of the course of events and, consequently, formulates universal theses about future fates in the spheres that this historical knowledge concerns. Moreover, this reflection provokes a revision of the significance of the world in the present times, portraying it, to a large extent, as the effect of mechanisms operating already in the past and as a stage leading to future forms. This last aspect of metahistory – the accentuation of the dense intertwining

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8. Burke, "Metahistory," 44.
9. Underhill, "Arnold Toynbee," 205.
10. Underhill, "Arnold Toynbee," 207.
11. Underhill, "Arnold Toynbee," 211.
12. Underhill, "Arnold Toynbee," 211.

of the present with the past and the future – makes its character coincide with that of theological reflection and raises questions about the difference between anticipation and prophecy, about where the role of metahistory ends and where the theology begins. One more thing should be mentioned: according to Underhill, someone who becomes a metahistorian ("a system-maker") as a historian "is to be regarded with the deepest suspicion" and "is attempting a project which is illegitimate for the historian."[13]

Initiating for the occurrence of the term metahistory role of the paper "Arnold Toynbee, Metahistorian" by Frank Underhill, has been emphasized by many researchers. The problem is that in this text we can find references to two previous publications that are devoted to the concept of the metahistory.

A Ragbag! A Bastard

Frank Underhill concluded his paper from 1951 on Toynbee's work with a list of "suggestive and useful"[14] items related to the author of *A Study of History*. There are, among others, papers published in the same year: "The Historian's Purpose: History and Metahistory" by Alan Bullock[15] and Chris Dawson's "The Problem of Metahistory."[16] Underhill may have known Bullock's text, critical of metahistory as such, and the Dawson paper responding to it. The publication dates of these three texts indicate an intense exchange of views in the community of scholars: the issue of *The Canadian Historical Review*, in which Underhill's text appeared, is dated November 1951, but the paper itself was to be written in May and supplemented before final publication; Bullock published his paper in February and Dawson in June of that year in *History Today*.

The short text by Christopher Dawson – "The Problem of Metahistory" – consists of two lines of narration. The author systematizes the description of metahistory, considering it an unknown term. At the same time, his text is a reaction and a kind of manifesto, in response to the critical voices of modern historians towards metahistory, who "demand that it should be banished from

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13. Underhill, "Arnold Toynbee," 218.

14. Underhill, "Arnold Toynbee," 218.

15. Alan Bullock, "The Historian's Purpose: History and Metahistory," in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time: An Anthology*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 292–299 [first print: Alan Bullock, "The Historian's Purpose: History and Metahistory," *History Today* 1, no. 2 (1951): 5–11].

16. Christopher Dawson, "The Problem of Metahistory," in *Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy (New York: New American Library, 1962), 281–287 [first print: Christopher Dawson, "The Problem of Metahistory," *History Today* 1, no. 6 (1951): 9–12].

the field of historical study."[17] He refers primarily to the aforementioned text by Alan Bullock, which – let us emphasize – did not describe about any theoretical possibility of metahistory, but warned against metahistorians already publishing (especially against Toynbee's analyses, which he indicated as the "extreme" of the criticized attitude).

Dawson's text is the result of a reaction to this criticism, and thus it is the criticism of metahistory that *de facto* triggers the process of its crystallization. Robert Doran states: "Though Dawson may not have coined the term 'metahistory,' he was perhaps the first to give it a positive meaning."[18] Anyway, a similar assessment appeared already in the 1950s: "The term 'metahistory' was first applied […] in derision, but was taken up later by the Catholic historian Christopher Dawson and used respectfully."[19] Of course, not everyone was convinced by Dawson. In the pages of *History Today* of October 1951, for example, a text by Max Beloff, "Plain History and Metahistory"[20] appeared, the effect of considering the possibility of reconciling historians and metahistorians. The author points out that, despite the commendable attempts, there is no such possibility.

This primary, clear trace of the sense of the term metahistory is therefore clearly negative. It can be even found in the definition from the *Dictionary of Concepts in History* from 1986, where the meaning of the first of the two basic meanings of the term is *de facto* invective:

METAHISTORY. 1. A speculative approach to history, that is, concern with broad, empirically non-verifiable matters such as the general patterns and ultimate meaning of human history; normally (though not always), pejorative when used in this sense. 2. A form of criticism that stands aside from normal historical practice and analyses history as a mode of inquiry and expression.[21]

We will return to the second, referring to Hayden White's strategy explanation of the term. At this stage of analysis, let us consider the arguments of the critics of metahistory that, I believe, are the actual beginning of the crystallization of the term. In addition, therefore, it is necessary to examine not only what Dawson

17. Dawson, "The Problem of Metahistory," 282.
18. Robert Doran, "Editor's Introduction: Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of History," in *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, ed. Robert Doran (London–New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 5.
19. C. Vann Woodward, "Toynbee and Metahistory," *The American Scholar* 27, no. 3 (1958): 384, 386.
20. Max Beloff, "Plain History and Metahistory," *History Today* 1, no. 10 (1951).
21. "Metahistory," in Harry Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 265.

defines, but also what he denies and what vision of metahistory emerges from the criticism to which he responds.

As Allan Bullock admits, initially his attitude to the discussed concept was not negative. At the first encounter with metahistory (with the text of *Decline of the West* by Spengler), he was "bowled over." However, when he encountered the proliferation of publications of subsequent authors – similarly generalizing and striving to create a system explaining the history (and these systems turned out to be contradictory) – his skepticism grew. Until the observation: "that this is to treat history as a ragbag in which every man will find what he wants to find, and what he expects to find. There is indeed no limit to the lessons of history, or to their contradictions."[22] Hence, Bullock shows the harmfulness of metahistory to the study of history. Now let's look at his arguments.

The argument begins by anchoring Toynbee's work in a scientific tradition that, according to Bullock, true historians should avoid. It is the speculative philosophy of Georg W. F. Hegel, whose "apostolic succession" is visible in the works of such figures as Marx, Spengler, Wells, Croce and Toynbee himself. Their research attitude is characterized by the fact that "they are all attempts to discover in history patterns, regularities and similarities on whose recurrence is built a philosophical explanation of human existence, or at the very least a panoramic view of the stages of its development."[23] While such intellectual activity is not scandalous in itself, it becomes such when it is observed in the work of a historian: "[E]qually obviously, it is not what most historians themselves mean by history. On the contrary, this a kind of speculative activity which many professional historians eye with dislike."[24]

According to Bullock, metahistorical point of view is sensitive to historical processes and strives to capture them as a whole. Meanwhile, the historian's duty requires the optics of the fragment. Only the truth about the particulars can be discovered and shown adequately. Generalization is a usurpation of knowledge and a temptation. For the researcher, no pleasure is equal to the one that he feels after creating some system that helps to wade through the thicket of historical events, to see them in their entirety. Besides, the pleasure is shared by metahistorians with sociologists. Thus, the historian's purpose is boycotted by poetic speculation. Bullock does not claim that the facts are distorted by metahistorians, but that for the sake of consistency and emphasis of historical mechanisms in the historiographical narrative, it is supplemented with speculative material that does not meet the standards of the historian's work. Northrop Frye expresses this view by saying that historians are convinced "that history is one thing and

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22. Bullock, "The Historian's Purpose," 297.
23. Bullock, "The Historian's Purpose," 292.
24. Bullock, "The Historian's Purpose," 292–293.

poetry another, and that all metahistory is a bastard combination of two things that will not really combine."[25]

The Problem

The title of Christopher Dawson's "The Problem of Metahistory" turns out to be doubly adequate. If a potential reader would expect from it a description of the problematics of metahistory, hence defining the field of its subject – it would be a good intuition. If he anticipated that he would find evidence that the very issue of metahistory was problematic, he would also be close to the truth.

Dawson derives the essence of metahistory from its etymology. However, he does not reduce it to some general sense-creating effect, which causes the connection of the core "history" with the prefix "meta," but to a specific mental operation that accompanied Aristotle's appointment of the term metaphysics. Then he transposes the description of metaphysics into the areas of metahistorical reflection: the nature of matter, the nature of being and the cause of motion and change are the nature of history, the meaning of history and cause and significance of historical change. Thus, he formulates the troubling field of metahistory, and at the same time its almost textbook definition. However, the question arises whether it defines the distinctive features of metahistory so as to emerge from what is already hidden under the concept of the philosophy of history.

Let us note something else. Defining metahistory in "The Problem of Metahistory" has its initial accent in the first paragraph, but the rest of the text seems to be mainly a reaction to Alan Bullock's "sweeping condemnation on metahistory."[26] The problem is that *de facto* Dawson also formulates a criticism of metahistory in his argument. He points several times what kind of perception of it is problematic for him. Thus, it shows that it is not a universal history, it is not sociology, it is not a history of culture. Note that it is likely that such terms of metahistory must have appeared in academic debates if the author finds such exclusions necessary to suggest.

Ten years later, Arnold J. Toynbee referred to Dawson's text. In the last volume of the monumental *A Study of History*, a short text on metahistory is included. Toynbee cites Dawson's theses (albeit often under a reporting duty) and refers to the Aristotle strand. Does this etymological affinity explain the essence of metahistory? Not for Toynbee. Thus, he reaches for the considerations of

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25. Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity. Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York, Burlingame: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 55.
26. Dawson, "The Problem of Metahistory," 282.

Kenneth W. Thompson on the philosophy of history.[27] He distinguishes three meanings: as a historical method, interpretation of the meaning of history, laws governing history. In this division one can see analogies with the one that Dawson made after Aristotle. Nevertheless, in describing metahistory we still remain within the considerations of the philosophy of history.

An Irreducible Basis

Hayden White, in *Metahistory* does not define directly the title term for his book. In the entire volume of over 450 pages, this term is used in a dozen or so places, and it is more of a contextual definition of the argument rather than its main topic. Even the book index does not cover the concept. Furthermore, the author does not invoke Dawson and Toynbee's[28] texts in any mode in his book. Of course it is not because of White's lack of knowledge of Toynbee's and Dawson's texts. One of White's earliest articles from the late 1950s[29] does not allow to explain the absence of these characters in *Metahistory*. White appreciated the works of both authors. What could be the reason for such "concealment"?

In the preface to the book, in one of the first references to the title term, White refers to metahistory in the negation mode. He states what metahistory is not. Here is the excerpt:

> Unlike other analysts of historical writing, I do not consider the "metahistorical" understructure of the historical work to consist of the theoretical concepts explicitly used by the historian to give to his narratives the aspect of an "explanation." I believe that such concepts comprise the manifest level of the work inasmuch as they appear on the "surface" of the text and can usually be identified with relative ease.[30]

The names did not appear, but it can be assumed that, among others, the authors of the 1950s discussion are mentioned here. Perhaps the appreciation of Toynbee's and Dawson's works, by White's different understanding of metahistory at the same time, resulted in a lack of direct references to their texts.

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27. Kenneth W. Thompson, "Toynbee's Approach to History," in *Toynbee and History. Critical Essays and Reviews*, ed. M. F. Ashley Montagu (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956).

28. Toynbee appears once in a considerable list of scholarly thinkers on p. 433; the book's name index does not record this.

29. Hayden White, "Collingwood and Toynbee: Transitions in English Historical Thought," *English Miscellany* 8 (1957): 147–178; Hayden White, "Religion, Culture and Western Civilization in Christopher Dawson's Idea of History," *English Miscellany* 9 (1958): 247–287.

30. Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), X.

What distinguishes White's concept of metahistory is its relationship to the philosophy of history. If, in volume XII of Toynbee's *A Study of History*, we find the thesis that the traditional name of metahistory is the philosophy of history, White thinks differently. Consider the following fragment:

> In short, it is my view that the dominant tropological mode and its attendant linguistic protocol comprise the irreducibly "metahistorical" basis of every historical work. And I maintain that this metahistorical element in the works of the master historians of the nineteenth century constitutes the "philosophies of history" which implicitly sustain their works and without which they could not have produced the kinds of works they did.[31]

Thus, the philosophy of history in terms of a given historian is created by a metahistorical basis, a prefiguration of the historical field implemented in a given tropological mode, which underlie and inform historiography. The relationship between metahistory and philosophy of history is even more explicit in the book's conclusion when White summarizes the gains from his analyses. The following statement is made here: "I believe I have penetrated to the metahistorical level on which proper history and speculative philosophy of history have a common origin in any attempt to make sense out of history-in-general."[32] Metahistory constitutes the philosophy of history. Thus, it is in metahistory, as the source discourse, that the discourses of historians and philosophers of history are combined. And it is precisely this understanding of metahistory by White that does not permit the adoption of Dawson's and Toynbee's regulations. In *Dictionary of Concepts in History*, Harry Ritter considers White's *Metahistory* to be a continuation of the concept expressed in 1951 by Charles Dawson.[33] It seems to me that this is a problematic thesis and the sources of White's deliberations should be sought elsewhere.

A Profound Epistemological Tool

Northrop Frye has been mentioned several times in the *Metahistory* index. His analyses are used by White in significant considerations on irony. In the bibliography, White mentions one book by Frye, first published in 1957, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays,* the importance of which he emphasized in the preface. The first essay in Frye's book is entitled "Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes" – the author presents the concept of fictional modes (tragic and comic) derived from the analyses of Aristotle's writings. However, we will not find the

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31. White, *Metahistory*, XI.
32. White, *Metahistory*, 427.
33. "Metahistory," 268.

term "metahistory" here. Frye covers it more elsewhere. In the book published in 1963 – *Fables of Identity* – there is a short chapter, "New Directions from Old,"[34] which includes both a reference to the Underhill review we are discussing and a link between metahistory and Toynbee's work. White does not mention this book in the bibliography of *Metahistory* (he mentions it in one of the footnotes, p. 3; however, a more extensive discussion of this chapter can be found in his text from 1974[35]). Frye understands metahistory differently than Underhill and Toynbee or Dawson, and it seems that this very understanding lies at the heart of White's idea of metahistory.

First of all, Frye points out that "metahistory has two poles, one in history proper and the other in poetry,"[36] where – according to Aristotle's concept – poetry is more philosophical than history. The transition between these poles is a measure of the saturation of research to discern recurring motives. Frye notes that "when a historian's scheme gets to a certain point of comprehensiveness it becomes mythical in shape, and so approaches the poetic in its structure."[37] In the preface to *Metahistory*, White states similarly:

> I have been forced to postulate a deep level of consciousness on which a historical thinker chooses conceptual strategies by which to explain or represent his data. On this level, I believe, the historian performs an essentially poetic act, in which he prefigures the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain "what was *really* happening" in it.[38]

Let us consider one of the main implications of this approach.

It would seem that White's tropology derived from poetics (and, as Peter Burke brilliantly showed, many of his predecessors[39]) struggles to gain historians' recognition, above all, with one powerful charge: cancelling or weakening the need to pursue the truth in the research on past. This is an inconvenient position: it remains to either negate the textual layer of historiography, or state that it cannot be otherwise – historiography will always be poetic, fictional. Meanwhile, Frye – and White similarly – are choosing neither of these paths. They raise the question

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34. Frye, *Fables of Identity*, First print: Northrop Frye, "New Directions for Old," in *Myth and Mythmaking*, ed. Henry A. Murray (Boston: Beacon, 1960), 115–131.

35. Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 41–62.

36. Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 55.

37. Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 53–54.

38. White, *Metahistory*, X.

39. Burke, "Metahistory."

not as to whether historiography is fictional, but whether poetry is subject to similar criteria for assessing truthfulness as history. This is how the action of the writer is framed by Frye: "The discursive writer puts ideas and images into words directly. Like the historian, he makes specific statements, or predications; and, like the historian, he is judged by the truth of what he says, or by the adequacy of his verbal reproduction of his external model."[40] Thus, figurativeness is a tool for finding the truth – both in poetry and history.

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At this point I would like to conclude my analysis of the foundational events for the concept of metahistory, although, of course, the publication of White's book is not the end of the history of metahistory. The very bibliography of comments, criticism, and developments in White's *Metahistory* seems like an unwritable list – the more so as the book has been translated into many languages. The preparation of this paper was accompanied by constant remorse due to its target volume and, consequently, the modest number of citable contemporary references. In the final part of this text, I would like to refer to Mieke Bal's influential theory of travelling concepts to demonstrate the potential of the presence of the term metahistory in the dictionary of today's humanities. As it turns out, the stake of realizing such potential is a democratic way of knowing the world, which – considering today's opposing trends in global politics and social change – is essential in educational sense.

Travelling Concept

The link between the style of historical writing and the pursuit of truth is well illustrated by White in his essay "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth."[41] He argues there that the Holocaust, as a modernist event, requires a modernist narrative (for example, he discusses the famous comic book). An antiquarian, conventional, objective narrative may turn out to be inadequate due to the nature and scale of this event. Mieke Bal refers to this paper in the text "Deliver Us from A-Historicism: Metahistory for Non-Historians," in which she appreciates the awareness of the figurative nature of historical narrative precisely in the context of access to truth. Bal writes:

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40. Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 56.
41. Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth. Nazism and the 'Final Solution,'" in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 37–53.

this is not merely a matter of style, of literariness so to speak, but a serious matter of history-writing. […] Again, form – and its study, "formalism" – is not a meaningless or futile exercise, but a profound epistemological tool, even, or precisely, when the historical truth matters most.[42]

The author of these words excellently "triggers" the reflections of the author of *Metahistory* for her research on culture, showing their today's potential.

I would like to consider the term metahistory using Mieke Bal's travelling concepts. Its assumptions were formulated by the author in, for example, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide*[43] and the paper "Working with Concepts."[44] I can see two reasons for adopting here the optics proposed by Bal.

First, Mieke Bal's approach is structured from an interdisciplinary perspective and is dedicated to use it from that perspective. The specificity of understanding interdisciplinarity is described by the author herself:

> This is an instance of a concept travelling from one discipline to another and back again. The itinerary is to be termed inter-disciplinary in this specific sense. To call it "transdisciplinary" would be to presuppose its immutable rigidity, a travelling without changing; to call it "multidisciplinary" would be to subject the fields of the two disciplines to a common analytic tool. Neither option is viable. Instead, a negotiation, a transformation, a reassessment is needed at each stage.[45]

Thus, the question of the disciplinary nature of metahistory is relegated to the background. Moreover, I believe that such calibrated concepts become necessary tools for thinking about the past, because it is illusory to believe that the traditionally perceived object of the study of history, and established in the course of shaping the scientific fields and the division of academic labour, can actually be studied within one discipline. By virtue of a similar research intuition, Mieke Bal exposes disciplinary divisions as methodological dictates that narrow the area of research and research imagination. Freeing from these limitations should offer the search of the world primarily in terms of concepts.

The second reason is that Mieke Bal's analyses focus on the educational role of the humanities. The term metahistory – due to the type of actors conducting

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42. Mieke Bal, "Deliver Us from A-Historicism," 72.

43. Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide* (Toronto–Buffalo–London: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

44. Mieke Bal, "Working with Concepts," *European Journal of English Studies* 13, no. 1 (2009): 13–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/13825570802708121.

45. Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, 39.

the deliberations on it and the place where they are conducted – seems to be doomed to academic theorizing, slightly translating into the horizon of universal historical imagination. I believe that this is an existentially important metaconcept, as a space for naming our ways of being in the face of the past, that the term's final place is in commonality and colloquiality. Here, academic research works play the role of conscience and inspiring material (while being aware of the risk that both may be rejected, muffled, damaged, both inside and outside the *academy*).

In the text "Deliver Us from A-Historicism: Metahistory for Non-Historians," Mieke Bal, considering the importance of Hayden White's famous book, formulates a meaning of metahistory that supports these assumptions: "[…] 'meta-' means 'about,' as in 'critical examination of.' Metahistorical, therefore, would be the perfect term for a critical examination of what historicity means – and can mean – both for a reappraisal […] and for a critical examination of our own position in reconstructing it."[46] Thus metahistory serves democracy – at the level of noticing narrative possibilities and paths of expression, and at the level of naming mechanisms that are related to power, interest, or inertial. Hence, Mike Bal recognizes travelling concepts as a democratic way of knowing the world: "Working with concepts – discussing them, bringing them to bear on objects, and considering what they help us see – is a democratic way of practising interdisciplinary analysis in the Humanities."[47] Therefore, metahistory can be seen as the common historical imagination (a pool of possible ways of thinking about history, of perceiving and communicating it), thus as an important platform for creating democratic societies, or even constituting the minimum democratic nature of societies. Each totalitarianism is interested not only in forcing its own version of history, but also more vividly in shaping what can be said publicly about history, privately thought. We live in a time of global growth in totalitarian tendencies, which raises the question of metahistory.

2022. MetaHistory: Museum of War

Frank Ankersmit in the text "Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholia"[48] perfectly explains and uses Hayden White's metahistorical 'tools.' This text analyses difficult historical material – exhibits from the Yad Vaschem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. On its basis, Ankersmit indicates two types of

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46. Mieke Bal, "Deliver Us from A-Historicism," 87.

47. Bal, "Working with Concepts," 22.

48. Frank Ankersmit, "Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholia," in *Historical Representation* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2022), 176–194.

monuments – metonymic and metaphorical – and describes the imaginations of recipients that are compatible with them. He points out that for dramatic events, which should not be forgotten, especially by those who did not experience them directly, were not eyewitnesses, a metaphorical monument is dedicated, generally melancholic, keeping in a sense of a partially enigmatic loss.

On 25 March 2022, another museum was launched. It calls for metahistorical thinking literally and its exhibits are metaphorical by design. MetaHistory: Museum of War is a digital museum. It has been defined as "THE NFT-MUSEUM of the war of putin's russia against Ukraine" (sic!). The acronym NFT comes from 'non-fungible token' and means an item with a certificate of originality, a certificate that we are dealing with its only version, that there are no equivalent copies. The museum itself explains the acronym in a different way: Never Forget This. The MetaHistory is at the heart of the question of the modes of historical transmission.

The institution defines its goals as follows: "to commemorate the history of the current events in Ukraine, preserve the truth, and collect donations for humanitarian aid."[49] The collection is approved by the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine and is extended according to a procedure where the two initial points are:
(1) We pick news pieces of important events of the war in Ukraine,
(2) Top-notch artists create artworks – their interpretations of the news content & meaning.[50]
The next one is the granting of the NFT, the display in subsequent "drops," the sale of works, and the transfer of all collected funds to volunteer and ministerial funds.

The source of the prefix 'meta' in the name of the museum was probably not the term metahistory in its academic sense – or at least, it is not the primary source and the authors of the project do not point to it. The name seems to grow out of the colloquial understanding of the word. The term meta is now commonly used – mainly to denote an alternative to what is the physical or conventional reality. It has gained popularity with the change of the name of The Facebook Company to Meta, which in turn is to be a reference to the metaverse,[51] a three-dimensional internet, a new form of the online world, being created by the tech giant. This new universe is conceived as the future primary site of human functioning. The historical consciousness and awareness of the modes of constructing the story of the past – metahistory – seems to be crucial at the level of constructing and critiquing the metaverse.

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49. https://metahistory.gallery/about-us (17.09.2022).
50. https://metahistory.gallery/about-us (17.09.2022).
51. The term originates from Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash* (1992).

"In the times of persistent and permanent crisis history plays role of a limit experience teacher" – in 2022 Ewa Domańska argues perspicaciously.[52] Comer Vann Woodward, a professor of history, in a text from 1958 indicates the basis of the crisis in historiography that occurred after World War II. First of all, history has ceased to be Eurocentric, and the hierarchy of importance of individual topics that historians have considered crucial (especially the vicissitudes of the ruling dynasties) has been reorganized. Woodward states: "What was needed was a new history that responded to living needs, a history that established some vital connection between the present and the past as well as between the past and the future."[53] The consequence was the need for metahistory. The second decade of the 21st century is a series of global, mutually fuelling crises, not only related to the pandemic, but also dramatic on the ecological, political (volatile democracy) and social levels. 2022 gave rise to a political crisis in the military aspect, the global nature of which there is little doubt – the war in Ukraine. Indeed, it is time for the Metahistory.

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52. Ewa Domańska, "Wondering about History in Times of Permanent Crisis," Inaugural Lecture, 23rd International Congress of Historical Sciences [booklet], 45. https://ichs2020poznan.pl/en/to-download/ (17.09.2022).

53. C. Vann Woodward, "Toynbee and Metahistory," 384.

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