

## The Future of History

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**Author:**

Alun Munslow

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Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth

In *The Future of History* Alan Munslow tackles the big problem facing historians in the 21st century, the problem of whether history as we know it has a future and, if not, what historians should do about that. Munslow sees the main problem as methodological and, while this book does not solve that problem, it makes it inescapable, and provides a rare opportunity for historians to advance their understanding of where their profession stands going forward into the new century. The limitations of Munslow's argument stem, for me, from the fact that he does not sufficiently engage with the problem of language, and thus misses a key to methodological breakthrough. However Munslow presents a good case for his view that historians need to work much more experimentally, if they are ever going to produce real change of the kind that might save historical explanation from its current self.

The book's two parts (neither is titled) correspond roughly with the central division between critique and response. In each part discussion might be said to radiate rather than develop among several related topics, each of which functions as a continuing theme in each part. Five chapters in part one discuss aspects of the problem – the challenge to history as we know it – a challenge 'emanating from scepticism' and its offshoots, 'relativism', 'irony', and 'interventionist authorialisms'. Six chapters in part two treat aspects of the response to that challenge, attempting to present an 'experimental and expressionist' view of history that responds to the critique and offers historians a continuing vocation. Munslow thoughtfully provides an introduction and summary at the beginning and end of the book, and he similarly bookends each chapter. Munslow has taken on a huge topic, one with many subplots, and readers no matter how prepared will need to consult the thesis statement more than once in each section.

The problem for historians, Munslow rightly maintains, begins with the truth claims implicit in their method.

As others including me have argued, those truth claims are based on a representational model of knowledge and perception that is itself in question; and here is where Munslow's choice of materials exerts a powerful influence. Like so many in English-speaking cultures, especially the UK and North America, Munslow has decided not to feature the contributions to this critique of representation by philosophical writing in French, especially that by Foucault and other heirs of Saussure. So although these sources are occasionally discussed, the essential critique from linguistics does not really inform the argument. This is quite understandable given the unnecessary opacity of so many of those writings: unnecessary at least to the English speaking heirs of King James. But the heirs of Saussure nevertheless provide an antidote to the deeply rooted empiricism of Anglo-American culture and even to the instrumentalist version of the English language now used across the range of practice from economics to art.

Each chapter deals with a central topic or cluster of topics in ways that overlap with the discussion of other topics in other chapters; taken together they explore aspects of the central problem. This in itself is a methodological choice, even commitment, which is worth noting because it avoids the format of the kind of truth-seeking approaches that define the central problem. If history is literature, and that case has been made in unanswerable ways, then this thematic development format resembles a key device which, I have argued, characterizes the best writers of the 20th century: writers who, unfortunately but tellingly, originate mainly in Romance languages, not English: narrative that uses thematic development precisely to thwart the too-familiar language of 'truth-seeking'.

Munslow begins (chapter two) by summarizing the key assumptions of historians who conduct business as usual when it comes to historical explanation. Foremost among these assumptions is the historian's faith that what his or her narrative presents is the truth, or as close an approximation to truth as is humanly possible to achieve: that, in short, historians are scientists (this is not Munslow's term) using a scientific method in which evidence is gathered, mutually informative measurements are taken, and reliable knowledge is achieved. Munslow sees the main critique of this approach coming from a 'scepticism' (chapter three) that has been born in response to the horrors of our times. The broad field invoked by even these relatively unproblematic observations indicates both the value and limitation of Munslow's chosen methods. Observing a wide field is essential for historians if they are to understand the challenges to their enterprise sufficiently to respond to them creatively; on the other hand a wide field can pre-empt to some extent productive exchange among those who establish themselves as specialists and thus regard wide-ranging experiment with method and material with suspicion or even blank fear.

Problems of definition are legion in any discussion of such large topics. I want to mention one here, the use of the term 'relativism' as one of several sub-engines for our scepticism concerning truth-telling. Use of the term 'relativism' is widespread in the book so it is worth mentioning that relativism is the core value of conventional historical writing, not part of the challenge to it. Historical writing exists as the solution to the problem posed by relative measurement, and it does so using a method that has its roots in the early sources of empiricism, even though the historical convention as we know it today took centuries to unfold from those roots. So while scepticism, as Munslow defines it, may be at the heart of the critique, 'relativism' undermines the argument. It is precisely such founding definitions as this that are in question and require discussion.

Munslow offers irony as a narrative strategy that operates close to the heart of the challenge to history (chapters four and five). Irony is a double narrative strategy, 'both thesis and anti-thesis', that requires historians to deal with the fact of fabrication in historical writing. Ironic doubleness interferes with the truth-seeking effort of conventional history. But these are literary terms, and Munslow's are somewhat different, beginning with the four 'main tropes' of Hayden White's argument in *Metahistory* that ground his argument about the literariness of historical narratives. And if history is literature it is invention, and not the sheer observation that the historian / narrator implies. Munslow does not underestimate the difficulty, and concludes part one with the caution that we should read historians through their assumptions. But that of course is the problem; who knows what assumptions are imported from the many possible sources into one's conduct, not to mention one's writing? If one managed to avoid merely talking about oneself, how would stating assumptions change how history is written? I can imagine an assumption prologue followed by an

entirely conventional piece of historical writing. Munslow suggests that these problems can only be approached by a 'self-conscious duty of epistemic discontent' which is an elegant phrase to keep in mind as a guide to methodological innovation.

One final point about doing something really new. One cannot re-invent a language, nor even a discipline, single-handed. I'd extend Munslow's 'epistemic discontent' to include 'methodological discontent' as a guide for historians interested in being creative. In Munslow's method, I find so many four-fold distinctions that I feel I'm reading Aristotle as channelled by Northrop Frye or Wayne Booth: four modes of scepticism (pp. 4, 40), four kinds of irony (pp. 78, 83), four figures of speech (p. 80), four modes of historical scepticism (p. 89) – this is a kind of classification that seems at odds with the main argument about how irony undermines truth-seeking. The same could be said of any method, and having a method is not a crime. But discontent may not be enough to precipitate something new. As Foucault said, it is very hard to say something new; that is because language is radioactive with long-engrained usages which so easily slip from notice. That is what I take to be the main import of the phrase, so objectionable to so many, that 'language speaks us'. Munslow does important work making such issues evident, maybe even making 'discontent' seem necessary but insufficient to the effort of rescuing History from itself.

The burden of part two generally is to propose ways in which the challenge to historical method can be used to discover new ways of 'doing' history. At this juncture it becomes very important how the problem has been defined in part one. If the problem is one of epistemic discontent then discontent can be managed, perhaps even used, to rescue key terms like 'history' or 'self' or 'responsibility' – all terms important in Munslow's argument. However, if the problem were, say, *epistemic trauma* or worse, epistemic catastrophe, a stronger response and more radical solutions might be called for, solutions such as giving up 'story' altogether in favor of various methodological innovations including the kind of thematic rather than logistical development evident in Munslow's argument.

Instead of proposing something new and shelving conventional historical explanation altogether, Munslow opts for various ways of modifying present practice. He deals first with the 'responsibility' of historians to bring their 'ethical, moral, political and ideological values' (p. 123) into their histories such that the product is 'history artwork' done by an 'expressionist historian'. This historian imagines moving beyond competing visions of 'the past' to arrive at some aesthetic and ethical basis for writing that might promise new method and format. These ideas come in a relatively short section (chapter six) where he briefly mentions Derrida and other philosophers seeking similar emancipation from fixed assumptions and methods. The radical potential is glimpsed but, as already mentioned, Munslow chooses not to go there and he moves on instead to the relation of history and aesthetics, and the relation of epistemology and aesthetics (chapter seven), and thus back into the familiar language of agency and of projective, comparative outcomes. When Hayden White raised the issue of aesthetics he was making a kind of discipline-bending move, something still tragically rare in North American universities despite lip service to 'inter/trans/multi-disciplinary' work. Munslow does not choose this direction but turns instead to authorship, a more discipline-reinforcing move (chapter eight). He argues that his 'reasoning requires the reinstating, rehabilitation and understanding of the self, standpoint and subjectivity within the figure of the author-historian' (p. 148). It may be that these terms are adequate to describe a change with quite profound implications, though I suspect they are too invested in the wrong portfolio (the one being challenged) to do the work Munslow assigns to them. And the specialist invoked to carry the case, Gerard Genette, does not reassure me on this point. To say that such 'artwork' historians can make no truth claims seems only to repeat the problem outlined in part one, but not point toward new practice. It may even be untrue to say, as Munslow does, that 'the emplotted history does not pre-exist in the past' but has to be '*turned* (by telling)' into a story (p. 155): not true in the sense that, like White's tropes, Munslow's 'stories' do pre-exist the yet-to-be-written history and limit its possibilities. Borges describes a hero who dies, never knowing that he died so that a particular story could repeat itself. In that way, and as Saussure's heirs know, those tropes and plot-potentials do pre-exist what we, through story, create as 'the past'. Unearthing those tropes would be one way of meeting the challenge for historians to make their assumptions clear, though it involves a degree of methodological self-awareness that historians do not seem willing or able to encompass. Munslow does experiment with new concepts in suggestive ways.

For example, in the section on 'Authorship and story space' (p. 154), I wonder if the idea of 'story space' might resemble in spatial terms the concept of finite time that I have pursued and, if so, whether together they suggest an important new way of conceptualizing time and space that does not invoke what I call the 'media of modernity, neutral time and space'. The discussion does not go in that direction in this book and for the kinds of reasons already mentioned, but I think that would be a way to thwart habitual usage and achieve methodological innovation.

As many others have done, Munslow argues that the very idea of a recoverable past depends upon a concept of representation and that history claims to be a representation of reality. This challenge to representational systems discussed by Foucault and Derrida (but also by theorists that Munslow would call 'literary') offers some tools of thought for considering the foundational challenge to history. Munslow then turns to a literary point concerning the primacy of 'Form before content' (chapter nine). This arguably has been a mainstay of literary theory for a raft of 20th-century literary critics who continued to insist on this distinction until the critique of representation (it was already underway in the 19th century) finally reached them. For the advanced critique of conventional historical explanation, it is a distinction without a difference. In the interest of full disclosure I should confess to having worked extensively on this issue; my prejudices can be found in *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time, History in the Discursive Condition: Reconsidering the Tools of Thought* and *Realism and Consensus* (on the evolution and many paradoxes of English narrative from Homer to Henry James, where both representation and history appear as forms of consensus).<sup>(1)</sup> Munslow at his best does suggest that what history communicates is not separate from its form; I would go further and say, its form *is* what history communicates including all its commitments to developmental causality, stable identities, truth telling and the rest of it. Finding the right language is the trick, and for me the dualistic separation of form and content in itself reinstates the very representational move that Munslow is challenging: another example of the sneaky way systems of meaning and value have of reasserting themselves. Renewal of history is not possible using representational instruments because they are the problem.

Munslow concludes his argument with two chapters on 'experimental' and 'expressionist' history (chapters ten and 11), each offered as a way to conceptualize new modes of history as responses to the 'epistemic impasse' he has outlined in so many different ways. Munslow does leave the terms to define themselves in terms of history rather than taking the quixotic path of proposing a way to overcome it. Acknowledging the problem is the first step; and part of that first step is paying attention to the value-laden qualities of historical writing. There will be more steps, but not until we have begun with the necessary first one. Where does that leave us? In the in-between, a fine and famously French place to be, and perhaps one safer than most from positivist impingement. Munslow looks forward to exploration of what expressionist history or 'artwork history' might be, which are more like mental preparation for new explanation than a presentation of the new explanation itself for which the necessary experimentation has not taken place. I like the idea of expressionist history, and understand how the term moves beyond representation in painting. Munslow describes his interim position as a kind of super scepticism and recommends 'addressing the effect of "pastness" on the historian and her or his understanding and personal engagement' (p. 183). As Munslow readily admits, his few examples amount at most to a 'minority sport' (p. 200). This suggests to me that collective action is required. Perhaps we need a Kingsley Amis Comedy Club for recovering historians. In any case, the change needed is change in an entire language, an entire discursive system; nobody can do that single-handed.

In the long term the choice Munslow offers is between history and history with a difference (acknowledgment of personal engagement). He says quite plainly that 'there is no epistemic evolution to be traced *within* the conventional understanding of history' (p. 203) but he still writes as if conventional history can function positively if it is hedged around with personal qualifiers. I'm interested in the long-term choice and in the likelihood that, because history's fate will be decided long term, it will simply be trivialized to death without anyone having to trouble their representational slumbers with critique. To me the choice for the long term may be either to keep fingers in the dike until the (small) repair crew arrives to restore business as usual, or to let go completely of the culture of historical explanation rooted in early modernity,

including the values (neutrality, objectivity) that have given us the mixed blessings of modern science (penicillin, compound interest). With all the talk about whether historians should do this or that, we speak as if method were a consumer item: as if historians make deliberate choices when they write and are always on the lookout for the best, or a new or an acceptable method. But in fact historians have very little to say and perhaps know very little about their own methods either explicitly or by experimental example and whole herds of them appear to take offence if anyone else takes on the job. At present the established method for historians 'of a particular kind' is holding back whatever good might once have come of historical awareness when, in and after the Enlightenment, social upheaval gave history of 'a particular kind' its opportunity.

The threshold to something really new and engaging, something with real not ritual value, might come into existence when historians finally realize that they already inhabit the systems that will lead in new directions, and that the only real choice lies between trying to fathom these yet-untried tools of thought, and sticking to business as usual and continuing to mislead future generations. But if 'artwork history' is a key to the way forward, as a practicing historian I long for an example of what, exactly, constitutes the 'new'. Like most of the people you meet in the grocery store or on the underground I am a practicing historian: practice is at stake. History is not an academic preserve; it is the mental system by which most of us explain things to ourselves, and as such, its fate 'including botched attempts to resurrect it' has cultural importance well beyond academic exercise. History has been the last great expression of modernity, a culture by now half a millennium old and in need of renewal or, failing that, respectful burial.

It has been said that 19th-century intellectual historians were good at producing volume one but pretty bad at producing volume two. Munslow does a great deal better than that, but he does in the end face the volume two problem, something his 'conclusion' recognizes. He invokes the 'experimental' historian whose value-investments will either be explicit in his or her writing or will be discernable by readers (p. 218) but for anyone willing to *be* an experimental historian more is needed in the way of experimental modelling. Experiment requires a collective effort to move investigation beyond abstraction. It is worth noting that Munslow's own best writing here most approximates his language in an interview published in *Rethinking History* where his voice is clear and where his comments are generated in response to questions from his interlocutor, Keith Jenkins. The voice of the historian sitting at home in his office, as Kingsley Amis so brilliantly caricatured it in *Lucky Jim*, is the Voice of Authority ('History, Speaking' says the Department Chairman as he picks up the ringing telephone). That voice is no longer needed: in fact, it is very much in the way. One of the first steps toward a future for history might begin with cultivating a personal voice. This has nothing to do with saying 'I' and is not as easy as it may seem. For most historians 'of a particular kind' it could be as difficult as renovating the disciplinary language.

## Notes

1. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton, NJ, 1992); *History in the Discursive Condition: Reconsidering the Tools of Thought* (London, 2011) and *Realism and Consensus* (Edinburgh, 1998). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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