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CICLO XXI

**THE PLOT AGAINST THE PAST: AN EXPLORATION OF ALTERNATE  
HISTORY IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN FICTION**

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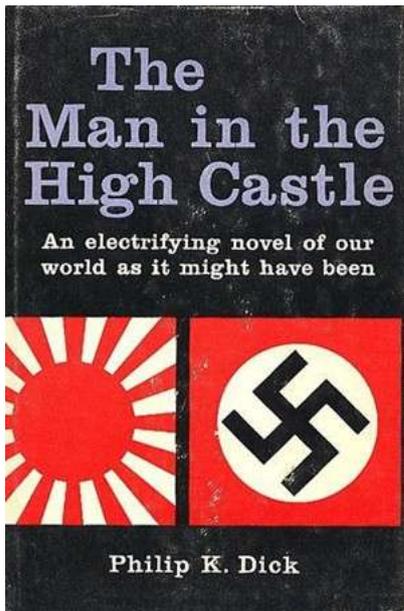


Fig. 1. Cover of the first edition of Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962). Image retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:TheManInTheHighCastle\(1stEd\).jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:TheManInTheHighCastle(1stEd).jpg) [accessed 9 November 2008].



Fig. 2. Cover of the first German edition of *The Man in the High Castle* (Munich: König, 1973). Image retrieved from [http://www.jokers-buecherboerse.ch/jokers\\_ch/app/detail.php?id=444414474&setMediaType=0&&sortOrder=&zid=ac722c48340c629ccab1333932bd1f99](http://www.jokers-buecherboerse.ch/jokers_ch/app/detail.php?id=444414474&setMediaType=0&&sortOrder=&zid=ac722c48340c629ccab1333932bd1f99) [accessed 26 November 2008].

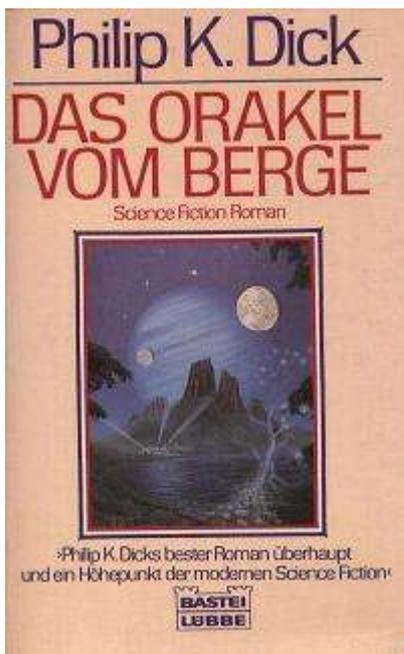


Fig. 3. Cover by Steven Vincent Johnson for a German edition of *The Man in the High Castle* (Bergisch Gladbach: Bastei-Lübbe, 1989)

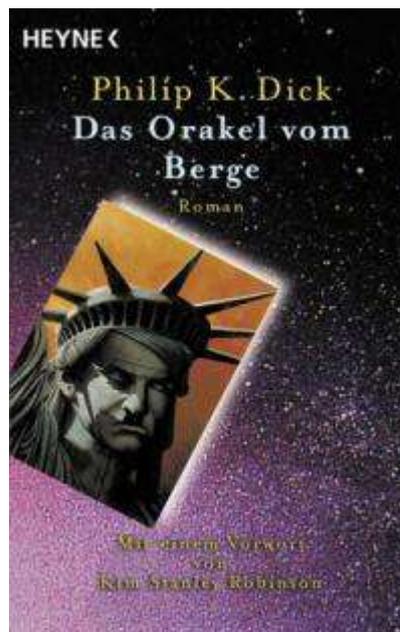


Fig. 4. Cover by Arndt Drechsler for another German edition of *The Man in the High Castle* (Munich: Heyne, 2000). Images 3 and 4 retrieved from <http://fictionfantasy.de/article6493.html> [accessed 29 November 2008].

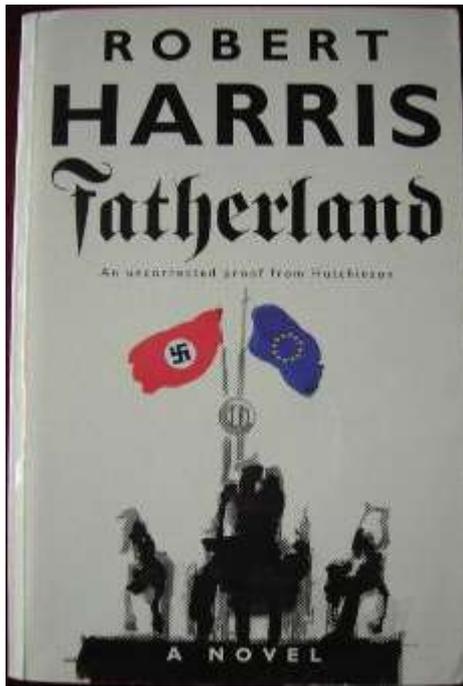


Fig. 5. Cover of the first edition of Robert Harris, *Fatherland* (1992). Image retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:RobertHarris\\_Fatherland.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:RobertHarris_Fatherland.jpg) [accessed 9 November 2008].

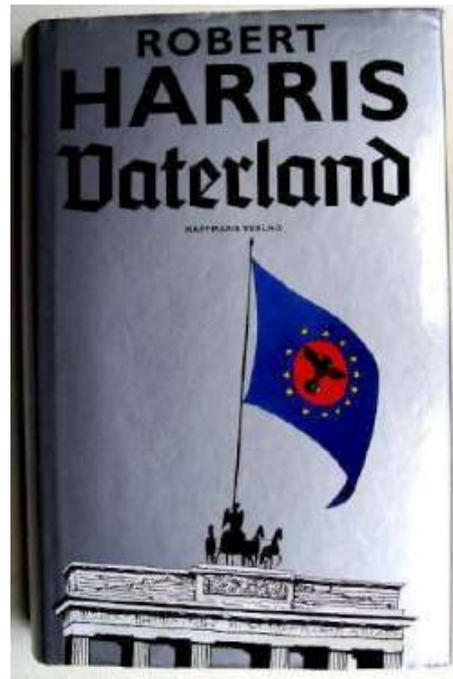


Fig. 6. Cover of the first German translation of *Fatherland* (Zurich: Haffmans, 1992). Image retrieved from [http://www.kapaza.be/Boeken/Oorlog/2271578/VATERLAND\\_FATHERLAND\\_HARRIS\\_Robert.html](http://www.kapaza.be/Boeken/Oorlog/2271578/VATERLAND_FATHERLAND_HARRIS_Robert.html) [accessed 8 November 2008].

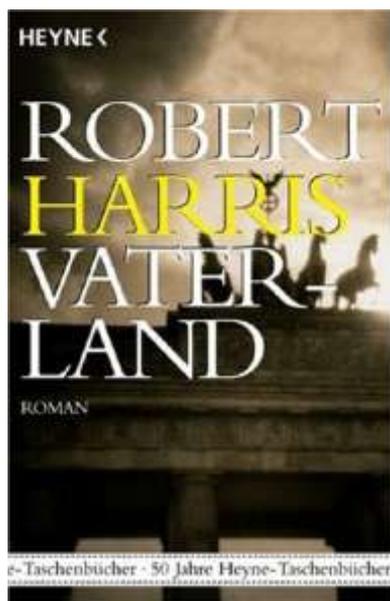


Fig. 7. Cover of a recent German edition of *Fatherland* (Munich: Heyne, 2008). Image retrieved from <http://www.buecher-nach-isbn.info/3-453/3453721802-Vaterland-Robert-Harris-3-453-72180-2.html> [accessed 9 November 2008].

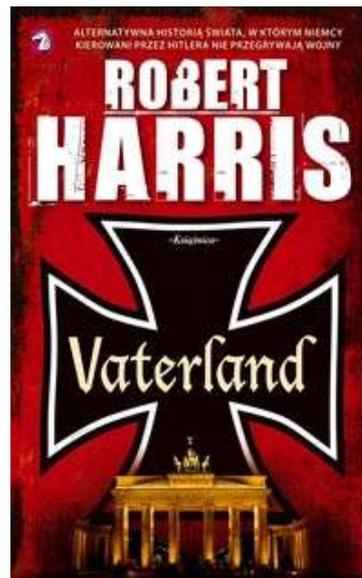


Fig. 8. Cover of a Polish edition of *Fatherland* (Katowice: Książnica, 2008). Image retrieved from [http://www.inbook.pl/a/produkt/id/196951/ksiazki\\_vaterland\\_harris\\_robert.html](http://www.inbook.pl/a/produkt/id/196951/ksiazki_vaterland_harris_robert.html) [accessed 9 November 2008].

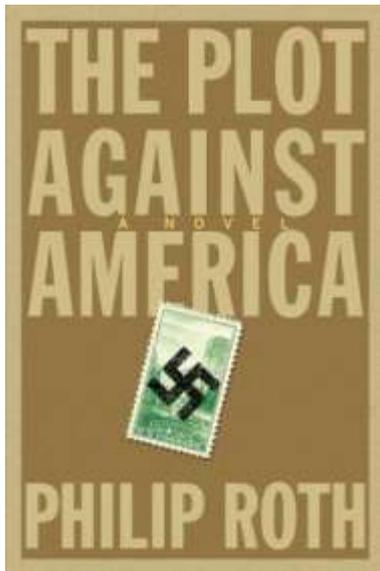


Fig. 9. Cover image of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004). Image retrieved from <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Plot\\_against\\_usa.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Plot_against_usa.jpg)> [accessed 28 November 2008].

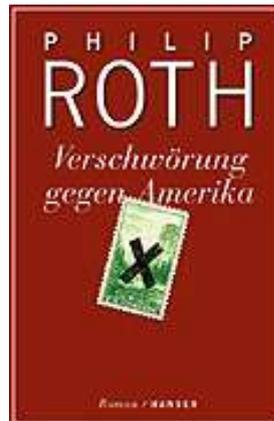


Fig. 10. Cover image of German edition of *The Plot Against America* (Munich: Hanser, 2005). Image retrieved from: <[http://www.hanser.de/buch.asp? isbn=978-3-446-20662-5](http://www.hanser.de/buch.asp?isbn=978-3-446-20662-5)> [accessed 30 November 2008].

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## Introduction

Alternate history [AH] is generally considered a subgenre within science fiction [SF]. However, while SF proper explores one of the possible alternatives to actuality set either in a distant world or at a future time, AH posits a counterfactual version of history which is presented as actual in the narrative, but is contradicted by the records. For this reason, texts describing future history or other, parallel worlds should be kept distinct from AH, as they can —theoretically — coexist with history as we know it and describe either the independent reality of another world or dimension, or one of the many, possible futures. The analysis of AH involves the question of the referential content of the text. Traditional literary theory assumes a *willing suspension of disbelief* on the part of the reader of fiction, whereas philosophers have often tended to deny any referential value to literary texts. More recently, however, there has been fruitful cross-disciplinary fertilization, and fictionality is now seen as a pragmatically decided feature of texts, which can be fruitfully analyzed in terms of Possible Worlds theory.

Possible worlds describe alternative states of affairs, analyzed in terms of their modal relationship to the actual world, which is usually taken as the world of reference and whose states of affairs are described by true propositions. However, fictional worlds exist only on the authority of the texts describing them, whose incomplete descriptions cannot be validated or supplemented by access to alternative sources or to reality itself. The worlds created by AH are not as autonomous from reality as are other fictional worlds, as the historical alternative they posit is inevitably compared to the actual timeline so that its plausibility may be tested.

AH is written as if it were historical fiction, containing characters and events partly or totally invented, set against a real historical background, but it is read as absolutely fictional, as it describes events that never happened. In contrast, historical fiction [HF] is written and read as essentially realistic, if not necessarily real in all its parts. The delusion of a clearcut distinction between facts and fiction has been exposed,

most famously, by Hayden White, who has pointed to the common discursive practices adopted by both historians and novelists, and analyzed the *emplotment* of historiographic discourse according to narrative forms borrowed from fiction. The ramifications are also momentous for counterhistorical discourse such as AH. If the *form* of emplotment encodes the narrative of past events so as to predetermine, to a large extent, its reception and interpretation, the same events may be understood to tell each time a different history. Indeed, the next logical step is the modification of the *content* itself, which is already, to some extent, an interpretation, an artificial representation of an object — the past — that cannot be experienced directly.

The writing of AH operates through the double selection that is common to all narratives: of the object of the text, and of a meaningful order in which its parts will be subsequently arranged. However, it requires another, intermediate process of selection: from the actuality of history one possible alternative will be extrapolated and developed. In this respect, AH or *allo*-history inherently recovers one of those forms of *otherness* that official historiography, in its rationalizing furore, tends to obliterate. AH is thus a challenging form: rhetorically, all but indistinguishable from other historical fictions; referentially, more fundamentally fictional than any realistic fiction, which does not contradict the received version of history.

AH is also different from historical counterfactuals [HC], speculative texts written by professional historians that usually present the alternative timeline as merely hypothetical. This argumentative form has been practiced unobtrusively by great historians of the past such as Livy and Gibbon, but only recently has it acquired some respectability as a powerful analytical tool overcoming the limitations of deterministic historiography and correcting the *hindsight bias* that prevents one from examining possible alternative outcomes for the events analyzed.

HC are subject to stricter plausibility constraints than is allohistorical fiction [AF] in the concoction of a *nexus event*, the turning point in history on which the alternative timeline is based; professional historians will confine themselves to those

alternatives which could have obtained, given the same initial conditions that produced actual history. Favourite turning points are wars, revolutions, and events affecting key historical figures, in accordance with Carlyle's Great Man theory, which holds that history is shaped by exceptional personalities.

Even when the hypothesis is not pursued and developed until the present day, both HC and AF often reflect *presentist* concerns, for example in the exploration of possible alternatives to the rise of the West to world dominance. In rejecting the received version of history, both forms of AH recognize the play of necessity and contingency in human events, as does Chaos theory in science: we do live in a universe governed by laws, but lack the instruments to measure and predict their workings adequately. Generally speaking, the longer the temporal span considered, the harder it is to make inferences with a reasonable degree of reliability, as too many factors come into play.

After defining the boundaries inscribing AH within the general field of discourse — whether referential or fictional — about history, some attention has been devoted to the distinction between AH and conspiracy theory: the latter is a type of discourse claiming that an alteration to past records (rather than events) did take place and some crucial information has been kept secret as a consequence. Consideration has also been given to the space allotted to AH as distinguished from non-fictional extrapolation about future history or more or less static descriptions of alternatives to contemporaneous society, as in utopia/dystopia. There follows a discussion of the relationship between AH and the more general postmodernist play with a past no longer taken for granted. Whereas conspiracy theory is preoccupied with the knowability of events, AH is definitely postmodern in that it reflects a general shift in fiction from epistemological to ontological concerns (McHale), but it is usually more rigorous than escapist parallel worlds stories or postmodernist *pastiche* mingling elements from disparate ages.

In its exploration of the hazy border zone between history and fiction — neither *what has happened* nor what *may* still happen, but rather what *could have* happened — AH might constitute a pragmatic form of *metahistory*, no less precious and insightful

than are theoretical elaborations on the form and object of historiography on the one hand, and on the nature of fiction on the other hand.

The first fully fledged counterhistorical narratives did not appear until the post-Napoleonic era. Geoffroy-Château's *Napoléon et la conquête du monde* (1836) is generally considered the first modern fictional AH, while the title of Renouvier's *Uchronie* (1876) has become a synonym for AH. Whereas John Collings Squire's collection of HC *If It Had Happened Otherwise* (1931) contributed to the acceptance of such speculative exercises as intellectual divertissements — if not yet as serious academic hypotheses — fictional AH came of age after WWII.

WWII is one of the favourite subjects of AH, for its undisputable importance, for the moral alternatives it presents, and, more simply, because it is generally known. This study has selected for analysis a triptych of narratives devoted to alternative developments and outcomes of the war. The selection has not the ambition of being representative of the diachronic development of AH as a whole, not even of the thematic cluster chosen for analysis. Rather, the works analyzed can be considered specimens of a general, progressive tendency of AH to go mainstream.

A fundamental contribution to the establishment of AH was given by Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (*MHC*, 1962), set in a counterhistorical US, defeated in WWII and split up in three by the victorious Axis powers of Germany and Japan, leaving a powerless buffer zone in the middle. The situation is complicated by the unstable reality of the novel, challenged by the subversive counternarrative of *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* but also by glimpses of yet another timeline, recognizable as our own. Ontological displacement is a recurrent theme in Dick's novels. No ultimate truth is available for the characters, each corresponding to a separate centre of consciousness and trying to make sense of a dangerous and chaotic world. But far from certain are also the respective roles and allegiances — even the identities — of the various characters, including the Americans, oscillating between collaboration and individual, perhaps pointless resistance.

The disturbing suggestion of the rather inconclusive ending is that man in the real world is also groping in the dark, proceeding by trial and error, with no cognitive and moral compass to show the way. Even the authorial attitude toward the fictional world is uncertain: neither the rather hellish world of the novel nor the *eutopian* alternative of *Grasshopper* correspond to our world, although both can be said to hint at it to some extent. In the final analysis, readers could feel authorized to choose for several, contrasting interpretations, including the *multiverse* option of each reality coexisting with the others, on separate or even communicating levels.

In Robert Harris' *Fatherland* (*FL*, 1992) the *presentist* aspect is more evident, as the victorious Reich of the narrative is polemically compared to the European Union of our timeline, starting from the cover image. The novel reached a wider, general readership, beyond the more specialized readership of AH and SF fans. Unsurprisingly, the reception of the book in Germany has been far less unanimously positive than abroad.

Borrowing many a cliché from detective stories — including the maverick protagonist — the narrative describes an inquiry into the crime of the century, the Holocaust. The unearthing of the embarrassing secrets of an aging regime, eerily similar to the actual USSR and the totalitarian society of *1984*, threatens to undo the diplomatic moves towards détente with the US. Analogous to Orwell's dystopia is also the rewriting of history to suit the needs of a totalitarian regime and cover up its crimes, thus creating an endless series of *alternate histories*, each suppressing its antecedent. What is not in the record did not exist, and, if narratives are the way humanity makes sense of the past, what cannot be told never happened in the first place. Highly popular narratives of the Holocaust such as *FL* can therefore serve the cause of memory as well as does the indispensable work of historians.

The analysis of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (*TPAA*, 2004) starts — literally — from the cover, which is as evocative of the contents as were those of *MHC* and *FL* (and of AH in general). The image refers to the Nazi threat incumbent on the

American landscape and to the stamp-collecting hobby of the protagonist, a younger alter ego for the author, one of many in Roth's work, which is largely autobiographic and had already featured passing reference to an anti-Semitic threat that becomes paramount in this narrative. Generally speaking Roth appears more at ease with the personal lives of himself and his immediate circle — however fictionalized — than with the larger historical picture.

There follows an analysis of the *agential constellation* of the novel, in which the fate of the Great Men, mundane gods who make history, is intertwined with that of the Roth family. Roth's imagination appears to have been haunted for sometime by the controversial figure of Charles Lindbergh, who finds a more positive counterpart in the Swede, the failed model father and husband and protagonist of *American Pastoral* (AP, 1997). However, there are both analogies and differences, even ontological, between the respective protagonists, as the Swede 'was fettered to history, an *instrument* of history', whereas Lindbergh, who defeats Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election of the narrative, is an active agent of history. Thus, Doležel's Modern Myth model can be applied to *TPAA* as to other narratives in which different sets of characters enjoy different status and power.

The main focus is therefore on the *nexus event*, the turning point which alters the course of history. Presidential elections lend themselves particularly well to being treated as decisive moments in American history, although it is arguable whether a maverick candidate like Lindbergh, for all his heroic aura and the way it could have been enhanced by the media, could have turned the tables so dramatically as to beat Roosevelt. At all events, what is least convincing is not the concoction of an alternative America but its sudden disappearance, leaving no discernible trace in subsequent events.

The way the descent of a country into fascist hell is exorcised, with the exposure of a *plot against America* that is as intricate as it is improbable and the ensuing, all-too-convenient disappearance of Lindbergh, is a *deus ex machina* solution that constitutes perhaps the weakest point in a narrative otherwise rigorous and convincing, in its

treatment of historical sources and figures — for example, that of the highly influential and controversial columnist Walter Winchell, who in *TPAA* becomes a generous if chanceless antagonist for Lindbergh.

It is as if Roth had wanted to offer readers just a glimpse of a danger that did threaten a whole country, not only the Jewish portion of its population. A similar message was conveyed in Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), which, retrospectively, could be read as an AH of sorts. In fact, *presentist* interpretations of *TPAA*, however rejected by the author, have been offered, some of them highly unlikely or controversial. The point both Lewis and Roth try to illustrate is that, although it did not 'happen here', it could have, and the Anglo-Saxon democracies were spared by the dictatorial wave that swept much of the world in the interbellum through a fortunate accident rather than their manifest destiny or intrinsic resilience to such a fate.

*MHC* contributed at once to the establishment of Dick as author, to the acceptance of SF within literature at large, and to the coming into its own of AH as a subgenre within SF proper. *FL* came in a later phase, and reached beyond the niche of specialized AH readers thanks to its contamination of realistic (counter)historical fiction with a protagonist and plot borrowed from the well-established, even formulaic conventions of the detective story. Finally, *TPAA* marks the somewhat awkward and idiosyncratic adoption of AH by a mainstream, by now canonical author. To sum up: *MHC* established — or helped to establish — AH *within* SF; *FL* did so *outside* SF; *TPAA*, *above or beyond* SF.

To the definitive acceptability in mainstream fiction of AH as a literary device will certainly contribute its adoption in recent novels by important authors. For example Doris Lessing, the Nobel laureate, uses in *Alfred & Emily* (2008) a counterhistorical backdrop for the development of an alternative family history. In the dreary alternate England of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), society is organized according to biological engineering, with the creation of clones and the establishment of a system of compulsory 'donations' of organs. The huge injustice goes unchallenged, the wrongs are

generally accepted as fair in comparison to the advantages. Thus, the novel is mainly an exercise in emotional restraint — both on the part of the narrator and of the protagonists — and raises more moral questions than it answers. But perhaps the most controversial among recent AH novels by mainstream authors is Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), set in a counterfactual postwar Jewish Alaska settlement enjoying large autonomy, whereas the foundation of the State of Israel has failed. The novel starts as a detective investigation on the murder of a purported Messiah, later to discover a plot to blow up the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, hatched by extremist Hasidic Jews. Their disparaging descriptions have sparked controversy, as they lack the human sympathy that emerges not only in *TPAA* but even in the earlier prose by Roth.

With this last example, the counterfactual investigation of WWII and of the crime of the Holocaust has come full circle, back to the heart of darkness of that historical tragedy; if the War itself no longer appears to elicit, in Anglo-American narrative, the same strong emotional responses as before, the Shoah and the ensuing foundation of the State of Israel still stimulate both narrative and speculative exercises that are either polemical or met with polemical reactions — and will probably continue to, in an age where the shattered illusion about the *End of History* has rekindled interest for the past, including the paths it has not taken.

## 1. The Pigeon Is Not Holed: The Quest for a Definition of the AH (Sub)Genre

Had Pyrrhus not fallen by a beldam's hand in Argos or Julius Caesar not been knifed to death. They are not to be thought away. Time has branded them and fettered they are lodged in the room of the infinite possibilities they have ousted. But can those have been possible seeing that they never were? Or was that only possible which came to pass? Weave, weaver of the wind.  
James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 2 ('Nestor'), 48-52.

### 1.1. Preliminary Definition and Brief History of AH

A working definition of alternate history [AH] should be reached without excessive difficulties, once some terminological ambiguities have been solved and the scope of the definition has been restricted to manageable size. Quite rightly, Collins laments the widening, proposed by Darko Suvin, the influential science fiction [SF] critic, of the meaning of the term 'alternative history' to include all narratives in which

an alternative locus (in space, time, etc.) that shares the material and causal verisimilitude of the writer's world is used to articulate different possible solutions of societal problems, those problems being of sufficient importance to require an alteration in the overall history of the narrated world. [Alternative History] subsumes but transcends, and eventually supplants, the classical utopian (and anti-utopian) form of static anatomy.<sup>1</sup>

The definition conveniently includes Suvin's key element of 'estrangement' or 'novum', which he sees as characteristic of the SF genre as a whole. However, the temporal element should be privileged over the spatial in a 'history', albeit 'alternative'; besides, reference to an 'alteration that will move the society [...] in a new direction, one alternative to that which would continue without the introduction of the novum' is a profession of faith in determinism, rather than in literary classification.<sup>2</sup> Extrapolation of present trends into even the relatively near future is a very risky business, as the voluminous history of unfulfilled predictions shows — the one thing that can be safely assumed about the future is that it will not turn out as expected.

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<sup>1</sup> Darko Suvin, 'Victorian Science Fiction, 1871-85: The Rise of the Alternative History Sub-Genre', *Science-Fiction Studies*, 10 (1983), 148-169 (p. 149). See also William Joseph Collins, 'Paths Not Taken: The Development, Structure, and Aesthetics of the Alternative History' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University Of California at Davis, 1990), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Collins, p. 13.

The usefulness of an all-inclusive definition that accommodates, under the same category, utopian/dystopian narratives, forecasts about the future, and alterations of the past is not apparent: with criteria so elastic, just about any narrative of social critique could be termed ‘alternat(iv)e history’. Indeed, Suvin’s *portemanteau* definition has led to the attempt to classify even George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* as ‘alternate history’, on the grounds that in the novel are

particularly prominent [both] criticism of Victorian social institutions and the use of themes and narrative techniques that emphasize the epistemological role of imaginative hypothesis, [...] specifically the novel’s Utopian speculations on possibilities for an alternate society dominated by a spirit of nationalism and led by a national hero.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, the label has eventually been understood to refer exclusively to texts based on alterations of history, but not always without overlapping, ambiguity, and unnecessary duplication.

Collins himself is not exempt from contribution to terminological confusion, when he starts his dissertation with the assertion — although attributed to a ‘cliché’ — that ‘Science Fiction is a literature governed by the extrapolative “What if...?” question’:<sup>4</sup> generally speaking, this is true of all anti-realistic or fantastic literature, whereas ‘what-if’ is the more specific hypothetical premise of AH, with reference to past, unrealized possibilities.

In fact, various terms have been adopted and used more or less synonymously, even when the meaning is different: ‘alternate’ and ‘alternative’ — although the latter is more grammatically correct<sup>5</sup> — have no registered distinctive meaning when associated with ‘history’, and the compound ‘allohistory’, preferred by Chamberlain,<sup>6</sup> has only the

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<sup>3</sup> Kathleen McCormack, ‘George Eliot and Victorian Science Fiction: *Daniel Deronda* as Alternate History’, *Extrapolation* (Kent State University Press), 27.3 (Fall 1986), 185-196 (p.186).

<sup>4</sup> Collins, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Collins, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon B. Chamberlain, ‘Allohistory in Science Fiction’, in *Alternative Histories: Eleven Stories of the World as it Might Have Been*, ed. by Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg (New York: Garland, 1986), pp. 281-300.

advantage of generating the convenient adjective ‘allohistorical’;<sup>7</sup> on the other hand, ‘uchronia’ — translated from the French ‘uchronie’ — is a more generic term, covering all fictions set in a time not corresponding to our historical timeline.

Thus, the term ‘alternate history’ [AH] will be used consistently in this study, and will be reserved for those narrative texts describing past events that contradict the received version of history. For this reason, texts describing future history or other, parallel worlds will be kept distinct from AH, as they can — at least theoretically — coexist with history as we know it and describe either the independent reality of another world or dimension, or one of the many, possible futures; correspondingly, scholarly speculation on alternative historical paths belongs with academic discourse, although admittedly it can be barely distinguishable, on the surface, from fiction.

General agreement and specific disagreement is the rule also as regards the identification of the earliest specimens of AH, and their inclusion or not within the subgenre according to various attributes. The question is of interest not so much for the purpose of attaching labels to individual texts as for the general relevance of the choices adopted, which can illustrate key classificatory issues. The first universally acknowledged example of AH is, more precisely, not a fictional text but a historical counterfactual, answering the same ‘What if ...?’ question as does AH but in terms of pure speculation, without requiring the suspension of the readers’ disbelief. In Livy’s *History of Rome*, the historian wonders: ‘What would have been the results for Rome if she had been engaged in war with Alexander [the Great]?’ Needless to say, Livy concludes that the might of the Roman army and the virtues and skills of its generals would have been up to the challenge, but not without first examining the hypothesis at relative length, comparing the respective strengths and weaknesses, ‘the numbers or the quality of the troops or the strength of the allied forces’. Eventually, the excesses and vanity of Alexander’s character would have emerged and been his undoing, even in the unlikely event that he had been able to defeat, one after another, all those magistrates

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<sup>7</sup> Edgar Vernon McKnight, ‘Alternative History: The Development of a Literary Genre’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1994), p. 3.

‘with whose valour and fortunes the Roman people have [n]ever for a single day had cause to be dissatisfied’.<sup>8</sup>

Brief mentions, asides, and passing speculations on historical alternatives are occasionally present in ensuing texts, but no substantial counterhistorical narrative is recorded before the nineteenth century, when the perceived acceleration of history after the French revolution, with unprecedented upheavals and reversals of fortunes, produced a renewed attention for the accidents of history and their consequences.<sup>9</sup> A minor example, significant nevertheless, is a history of France published in 1791, Delisle de Sales’ *Ma République*: one chapter postulates an alternative French revolution, with a stronger Louis XVI. While this speculation was written on the spur of the historical moment, the same idea is developed later in an essay by André Maurois, ‘If Louis XVI Had Had an Atom of Firmness’,<sup>10</sup> which contains an ironic metahistorical element in the description of ‘the Historians’ Heaven, [...] the paradise of scholars, [where they can] carry their researches forward through all eternity, in a sphere where all documents are accessible, all sources reliable, all witnesses available’.<sup>11</sup> Much more recently, the insertion of counterfactual speculation into textbooks is a development revealing the appeal of such historical discourse to young generations, accustomed as they are to virtuality and simulations in various fields of knowledge: one of the explicit purposes of such textbooks is not only to arouse the students’ interest but also to teach them ‘to avoid

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<sup>8</sup> Livy (Titus Livius), *The History of Rome*, Vol. II, trans. by Rev. Canon Roberts and ed. by Ernest Rhys (London: Dent, 1905) <<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Livy/index.html>> [accessed 10 June 2008], 9.16-19.

<sup>9</sup> A remarkable exception to the preponderance of French texts is Lorenzo Pignotti’s *Storia della Toscana sino al principato* (1813), hypothesizing a longer life for Lorenzo de Medici, which prevents foreign invasions of Italy and the advent of Protestantism; the book was translated in English in 1823 by John Browning as *The History of Tuscany*. See Eric B. Henriet, *L’Histoire revisitée: Panorama de l’uchronie sous toutes ses formes* (Paris: Encreage, 1999), p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> Translated by Hamish Miles and collected in John Collings Squire, ed., *If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History* (London: Longmans, 1931), pp. 49-77.

<sup>11</sup> Squire, p. 51.

alternate histories and misinformation on the Web by examining authorship, among other criteria'.<sup>12</sup>

*Ma République* is a dubious example of AH not only for the limited space devoted to the counterfactual speculation, but also for its 'confused and confusing shift of tenses, [...] sometimes in the subjunctive, sometimes in the historical present'.<sup>13</sup> A distinctive trait of AH is that, within the text, the actuality of the alternative timeline is stated and never decisively undermined. Therefore similar doubts could be raised about Alain-René Lesage's *Les Aventures de Monsieur Robert Chevalier, dit de Beauchêne* (1732), 'a boastful and unscrupulous adventurer who had the good fortune to encounter a writer of talent who could bring him out of obscurity'.<sup>14</sup> At a certain point in the rather heterogeneous narrative, the discovery of Europe by native American voyagers is presented as a hypothesis, as is clear from the tenses used:

*Si les peuples de ce nouveau monde, nous prévenant dans l'art de la navigation, étaient venus le premier à la découverte de nos côtes, que n'auraient-ils pas eu à raconter de la France à leur retour chez eux?*<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the suggestive reversal of perspective does not produce an independent reality; rather, it is the occasion for an ironic intercultural comparison — with the native Americans disgusted by the Europeans' barbarous bigotry — in the manner of Montesquieu's coeval *Lettres persanes* (1721).

While McKnight mentions Isaac Disraeli's essay 'Of a History of Events Which Have Not Happened' (published 1849, but written in the 1820s) as one of the earliest modern specimen of AH,<sup>16</sup> even Henriët's encyclopaedic — and, to some extent, interlinguistic — endeavour does not mention any fully fledged AH before the post-Napoleonic era, and Sargent tends to all but overlook the AH phenomenon: his first such

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<sup>12</sup> Lori Robinson, 'Turning Points: Actual and Alternate Histories', *Library Media Connection*, 26.3 (November 2007), 87.

<sup>13</sup> Collins, p. 160.

<sup>14</sup> René Baudry, 'Chevalier, dit Beauchêne, Robert', in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, ed. by George W. Brown and others (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 1966), Vol. 2 (1701 to 1740), p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Henriët, p. 64; emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> McKnight, p. 11.

entry is Holford's *Aristopia* (1895), describing an 'alternative settlement of the Americas'.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Geoffroy-Château's *Napoléon et la conquête du monde* (1836) is generally considered the first modern fictional AH, while the title of Renouvier's *Uchronie* (1876; first published 1857, in a shorter version),<sup>18</sup> which purports to describe an alternative development of Christianity with vast ramifications in European history, 'has become descriptive of an entire genre'.<sup>19</sup> Geoffroy-Château's is not only the first text to present a historical alternative at novel length, it also stresses its alternate actuality by juxtaposing it to our timeline, which is presented as hypothetical and rejected as absurd: how ridiculously improbable would have been, in fact, the Emperor's double confinement to — and subsequent escape from — two minuscule and remote islands? But only the readers, *outside the text*, with their knowledge of real events, can validate or reject either version of history.<sup>20</sup>

Classificatory issues are also raised by the discussion of the origins of fictional AH in English. The earliest candidate, Benjamin Disraeli's *Alroy* (1833), is about one medieval Jewish 'Prince of the Captivity', 'a personage whose marvellous career' had always appeared to the fascinated author, in the words of the Preface, 'as one fraught with the richest materials of poetic fiction'. This apparently downgrades the narrative to the level of historical fantasy, without any claim to authority; similar perplexities might arise from the 'supernatural machinery of this romance', however 'Cabalistical and correct' (*ibidem*).

The question is common with many alternate histories, and inevitably involves both authorial and reading attitudes toward the text, conferring it varying degrees of authority and potentially leading to widely divergent, even opposite interpretations: historical fiction is written and read as essentially realistic, if not necessarily real in all its

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<sup>17</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, *British and American Utopian Literature, 1516-1985: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography* (New York: Gardland, 1988), p. 106.

<sup>18</sup> See Collins, p. 168.

<sup>19</sup> McKnight, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Collins, pp. 89-90.

parts; secret history and conspiracy theory are written and read as if the events they describe did happen, in this not differing much from official historiography; historical counterfactuals are written and read with the understanding that what is described never happened, although it could have happened; finally, AH is written as if it were historical fiction, containing characters and events partly or totally invented, set against a real historical background, but it is read as absolutely fictional, for even if those persons existed and those events took place, the outcome was undisputedly different from what is narrated.

Ultimately, the issue is referential, depending on the truth value assigned to the events of the texts: while traditional historical fiction does not contradict the received version of history, regardless of the number of details and incidents it invents, AH is at odds with the record; this is explicitly acknowledged in historical counterfactuals, whereas it is generally left unsaid in fictional AH, with the implied understanding, however, that the reader is *not* to believe in the alternative presented. When this implicit pact is violated, AH can be claimed to confirm the truth of events it was never the intention of the author to affirm.

Another suitable candidate to the role of earliest AH in English is, apparently, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), in which the protagonist travels back in time, introducing modern technology in King Arthur's kingdom; but no tangible traces of his visit remain save for an enigmatic bullet hole found in a suit of armour.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Hawthorne's 'P.'s Correspondence' (1845) describes two parallel realities coexisting exclusively in the protagonist's mind, whereas Edward Everett Hale's 'Hands Off' (1881) — a rewriting of the Old Testament — tends to be discarded on the grounds of its legendary — rather than historical — subject matter and supernatural narrator; but, while the first criterion might apply to Twain's novel also, since the link between Arthurian legend and actual history is tenuous at best,<sup>22</sup> the second is of dubious relevance. Moreover, the transformation of the past alone, without

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<sup>21</sup> McKnight, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> McKnight, pp. 17-19.

tangible effects upon our present, does not necessarily produce a ‘secret or apocryphal history’, in which the alteration ‘was subsequently suppressed by the fantasy of “official” history’:<sup>23</sup> rather, it allows a more fruitful distinction between alternate histories focusing of the event that produced the alteration and those that explore its long term consequences — or even start *in media uchronia*.<sup>24</sup>

More dubious still is the inclusion as AH of two early twentieth century stories, O. Henry’s ‘Roads of Destiny’ (1903) and Henry James’ ‘The Jolly Corner’ (1908), in which ‘the technique of divergent narratives [is used] to comment upon individual destiny and free will, themes addressed on a wider scale by alternative history’: the argument is weak, as ‘comment upon individual destiny and free will’ might be defined the theme of just about any sort of fictions, from *Oedipus Rex* onwards. Moreover, the alteration of ‘only fictional events, not historical ones’ makes of the narratives an exploration of alternative possibilities within the ontological frame of fiction itself, which has little if anything to do with the actuality of history.<sup>25</sup> More importantly still, even the modification, within a text, of the individual destiny of real people does not qualify as AH, unless the historical frame wherein their lives are situated is also modified — a point writers of historical fictions have always been aware of, and exploited by inventing characters whose fates are pliable at will against an unmodified historical background.

Quite banally, the *alternative* of AH should concern *history*, otherwise it is only one of the weeds grown in the luxuriant gardens of forking paths so common in the age of ubiquitous hypertexts. Not that historical discourse has remained unaffected by this evolution, as the proliferation on the internet of alternative versions of key events plainly shows: rather, the scope and nature of the alteration is different, and concerns either real or fictional, collective or individual events. The overlapping is possible, however, when the individuals concerned are public figures, both recorded by history and affecting its

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<sup>23</sup> McKnight, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Collins, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> McKnight, pp. 20-21.

course. For example, the Napoleon of *War and Peace* can utter speeches for which no official record is available, but not make decisions whose outcome can significantly alter the course of history.

After the early, tentative and hardly illustrious examples, it was still a long way before AH acquired recognition, both critically and theoretically: ‘Some of the seminal works, written in French a century and more ago, have lain in obscurity even in France’.<sup>26</sup> While Squire’s collection of historical counterfactuals *If It Had Happened Otherwise* (1931) contributed to the acceptance of such speculative exercises as intellectual divertissements — if not serious academic hypotheses — fictional AH came of age after WWII, and Ward Moore’s *Bring the Jubilee* (1953), set in an alternate America where the South has won the Civil War, is widely acknowledged as the first masterpiece of the subgenre. Another fundamental contribution to its establishment was given by Philip Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) — for some, ‘the paradigmatic AH text’<sup>27</sup> — whereas another narrative based on the same premise of a Nazi victory in WWII, Robert Harris’ *Fatherland* (1992), achieved vast popularity beyond specialized readership.

In recent years, AH is witnessing a booming production. One particularly prolific and popular author is Harry Turtledove — himself a Byzantine History PhD<sup>28</sup> — with as many as 82 AH titles listed by the *Uchronia* website under his name as of 15 June 2008.<sup>29</sup> More generally, and more importantly still, there is a renewed interest in the subgenre worldwide, but with a distinct predominance of Anglo-American authors — whereas the word ‘uchronie’ has even disappeared from French dictionaries.<sup>30</sup> By now mainstream authors also try their hand at AH; one of them is Philip Roth, whose *The Plot*

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<sup>26</sup> Collins, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Collins, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Duane Dudek, ‘Old Stories, New Boundaries: What-If Questions Are Answered in Different Worlds’, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 27 October 2002 <<http://www2.jsonline.com:80/enter/books/oct02/90603.asp>> [accessed 24 April 2006]

<sup>29</sup> *Uchronia: The Alternate History List*, ed. by Robert B. Schmunk <<http://www.uchronia.net/>>.

<sup>30</sup> Henriot, p. 202.

*Against America* [hereafter: *TPAA*] — yet another alternate history devoted to WWII, but with some peculiarities — is the main focus of this study.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Philip Roth, *The Plot against America* (London: Cape, 2004).

## 1.2. Boundaries of the (Sub)Genre and Relations to Other Genres

### 1.2.1. AH, Fictionality, and Possible Worlds

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.  
(W. H. Auden, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats')

AH as a literary subgenre is read and interpreted, like any other fiction, as the description of events unreal or, at any rate, whose correspondence to reality cannot be ascertained on the authority of the fictional text alone. With this understanding, however, fiction is also constructed as if what it narrates did happen; so much so that of readers is demanded, if only for the limited scope of the reading experience, that they relinquish their natural scepticism and accept what they are reading as if it were a truthful account, regardless of the level of mimesis it achieves. This convention requires what has probably never been better termed than a 'willing suspension of disbelief', which not only 'constitutes poetic faith' but also grounds the fictional interpretation of texts on a pact — implicit or explicit — between narrator and reader, and substantially undermines — and eventually frustrates — the attempts, however skilful, to grant or deny referential content to texts on the basis of immanent features they purportedly share.<sup>32</sup>

The willingness of even the most experienced and supposedly disenchanted readers to treat fiction as factual report can lead, quite incongruously, to the sort of investigations synthesized by the infamous query: 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?'<sup>33</sup> More recently, literalistic interpretive zeal has stretched so far as to motivate the expense of a considerable amount of time — and, presumably, taxpayers' money — in the attempt to pinpoint the exact date of Odysseus' violent recapture of

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<sup>32</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (New York: Gowans, 1852; first published 1817), p. 442.

<sup>33</sup> John Britton, 'A. C. Bradley and those Children of Lady Macbeth', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 12.3 (Summer 1961), 349-351.

Ithaca after his long absence, with complex calculations of the motions of heavenly bodies, based on their description in the narrative, taken at face value as if it were an item of news and not a fiction.<sup>34</sup> Telling the former from the latter on a less erratic and sounder basis, however, is not an idle undertaking, as ‘the critical game of constructing a world outside the given material of the play’ is part and parcel of the reading process itself: it might as well be accepted, and played according to clear rules.<sup>35</sup> Their definition has usually not been the task of astronomers or mathematicians — as in the abovementioned determination of the solar eclipse coinciding with the slaughter of Penelope’s suitors by Odysseus — but of philosophers and theorists of fiction.

Traditionally, literary theory tended to take fictionality as an immanent textual feature that did not require much analysis or explanation, whereas philosophers tended to discard fictional texts as either false or devoid of truth value. According to the classical segregationist view, ‘there is no universe of discourse outside the real world’; thus, ‘existence [...] can be ascribed only to objects of the actual world’, although referring and nonreferring expressions are linguistically indistinguishable.<sup>36</sup> For all his ‘daring ontology and semantics’, even Plantinga expressed a ‘Russellian conception of fictionality, stating that “stories are about nothing at all”’.<sup>37</sup>

Recently, however, both literary theorists and philosophers have devoted more attention to fictionality as ‘relative to a given cultural context, as a pragmatically decided feature of texts’, which can be fruitfully analyzed in terms of Possible Worlds theory.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Q. Choi, ‘Odysseus’ Return from Trojan War Dated’, *LiveScience*, 23 June 2008 <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25337041/>> [accessed: 25 June 2008].

<sup>35</sup> Britton, p. 349.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 232. Plantinga’s stance on possible worlds is one of *moderate realism*, positing that ‘the actual world has the distinction of actually obtaining while all other possible worlds exist in the actual world, yet they do not actually obtain’: Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 23; see also Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). On the other hand, Bertrand Russell is a staunch defender of the segregationist view of fiction, ‘denying nonexistent individuals any ontological status, and [...] proving that statements about such individuals are false on logical grounds’: Pavel, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Ronen, p. 10.

Thus, the analysis of fictional worlds has reached ‘Beyond Structuralism’;<sup>39</sup> but the results, however important their contribution to the understanding of fiction in general and AH in particular, do not appear to be conclusive. This is due to the very nature of the texts under analysis, which constitute the main — if not the only — source of validation for the worlds they bring about.

Possible worlds describe alternative states of affairs, analyzed in terms of their modal relationship to the actual world, which is usually taken as the world of reference and whose states of affairs are described by true propositions. This creates problems as regards the treatment of fictional worlds. Unlike world-imaging texts, which describe the real world and whose statements can be validated according to the fidelity of the description, fictional texts are world-constructing, in that the worlds they describe are semiotic objects.<sup>40</sup> However, the *Magnum Opus*<sup>41</sup> constituted by the text cannot be an exhaustive description of the fictional universe, complete with its entities, laws, and possible alternatives. Admittedly, the same is also true of world-imaging texts, which cannot possibly aspire to the exhaustiveness of Borges’ ‘Library of Babel’. Nevertheless, information about the actual world can always be retrieved otherwise, by recourse to other texts or direct observation.

Ironically — but only slightly so — the concept of possible worlds is brilliantly illustrated by a fictional example, the aforementioned description of ‘the Historians’ Heaven’ by André Maurois:

‘O human presumption!’ said the Archangel... ‘Every thought that traverses the mind of God partakes ipso facto of a manner of existence no less real than that which you, mankind, ascertain through your five poor senses . . . There is no privileged Past . . . There is an infinitude of Pasts, all equally valid ... At each and every instant of Time, however brief you suppose it, the line of events forks like the stem of a tree putting forth twin branches . . . One of these branches represents the sequence of facts as you, poor mortal, knew it; and the other represents what History would have become if one single detail had been other than it was . . . These infinite branchings make up the Unrealised Possibilities, and I am here as their Curator . . . Do you understand?’<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> As reads the title of the first chapter in Pavel, pp. 1-10.

<sup>40</sup> Doležel, p. 24.

<sup>41</sup> The term refers to the ‘book about the [actual or possible] world’, containing ‘the complete list of sentences’ that describe the world itself, understood as an abstract collection of states of affairs (Pavel, p. 50).

<sup>42</sup> Squire, pp. 52-53.

The description, however, is more fitting for a universe in which parallel (rather than possible) worlds, originating from various points of divergence in the past, coexist next to each other and enjoy the same ontological status, as in the ‘multiverse, the global scheme that encompasses everything that exists’, posited by theoretical physics.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, traditional Possible Worlds theory as first elaborated by Leibniz posits that, of all possible worlds, only one, the best, becomes real once its possibility has been actualized by God’s will; likewise, quantum mechanics holds that, however influenced by observation — and therefore unpredictable, as postulated in Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle — ‘of all the possible positions or trajectories of the electron, only one will be realized’.<sup>44</sup> Theoretical opinions may and will vary, as not all theorists subscribe to the view that there is ‘a fundamental difference between the actual world and the merely possible ones’;<sup>45</sup> yet common sense tells that the famous cat of Schrödinger’s paradox cannot be simultaneously alive and dead, not in the same universe at any rate.<sup>46</sup>

Once again, Maurois brilliantly captures the tension between the perception of one’s reality as the only existing world and the possibility that many alternatives be realized alongside it:

‘If all Possibilities have the same validity, why bestow the title of “real” on the one which I have lived, and that of “unrealised” on these others which, you say, are equally valid?’  
 ‘Because,’ said the Archangel, ‘this is your Heaven . . . Paradise is individual.’<sup>47</sup>

Which translates David Lewis’ modal realism, a rather extreme view on possible worlds, and one difficult to reconcile with the analysis of fictional worlds: it claims that ‘actuality is an indexical notion whose reference varies with the speaker’, as “‘the actual

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<sup>43</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘From Parallel Universes to Possible Worlds: Ontological Pluralism in Physics, Narratology, and Narrative’, *Poetics Today*, 27.4 (2006), 633-674 (p. 634).

<sup>44</sup> Ryan, 2006, p. 638.

<sup>45</sup> Ryan, 2006, p. 645.

<sup>46</sup> Ryan, 2006, pp. 638-639. The paradox also inspired a novel about alternate universes, Frederik Pohl’s *The Coming of the Quantum Cats* (New York: Bantam, 1986).

<sup>47</sup> Squire, p. 53.

world” means “the world where I am located”, and all possible worlds are actual from the point of view of their inhabitants’.<sup>48</sup>

It appears thus that ‘a growing philosophical interest in nonexistence and possibilism’ nicely combines with a more pragmatic approach to fictionality by literary theorists.<sup>49</sup> For all the recent ‘cross-disciplinary fertilization’, however, the ontological status of fiction is still uncertain at best.<sup>50</sup> Currie, for example, is rather dismissive: ‘Fictional worlds, if there are any, cannot be assimilated to possible worlds, [since the former] are always indeterminate and sometimes inconsistent’.<sup>51</sup> On this view, ‘works of fiction generate games of make-believe’, in which the ‘fictional author’ and the ‘informed reader’ participate.<sup>52</sup>

As briefly sketched above, there are wide-ranging differences, both in theoretical elaboration and in the reception of texts which, more often than not, contain reference to both actual and clearly fictional entities:

During the reading of *The Pickwick Papers* does Mr Pickwick appear less real than the sun over Goswell Stree? In *War and Peace* is Natasha less actual than Napoleon? Fictional texts enjoy a certain discursive unity; for their readers, the worlds they describe are not necessarily fractured along a fictive/actual line.<sup>53</sup>

Ronen’s reference to ‘the capacity of fiction to actualize alternative or contingent properties’ fails to mention this as a distinguishing feature of AH: not *all* fiction can be ‘treated as a game with possibilities not actualized in our world’.<sup>54</sup> If the modal link between the actual and the fictional world is severed, so is the possibility to validate the fiction taking reality as referent.

Ronen is aware that ‘the concept [of possible worlds] loses its original meaning and becomes a diffused metaphor’ unless it is clarified and adapted to its use in literary theory, lest the interaction with philosophy be misleading. But she fails to account for the

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<sup>48</sup> Ryan 2006, pp. 645-646. See also David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

<sup>49</sup> Ronen, p. 20.

<sup>50</sup> Ronen, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 54.

<sup>52</sup> Currie, pp. 71-75.

<sup>53</sup> Pavel, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> Ronen, pp. 53-54.

specificity of AH when she highlights how ‘fictional facts do not relate *what could have or could not have occurred in actuality, but, rather, what did occur and could have occurred in fiction*’.<sup>55</sup> As Ronen again reminds us:

Possible worlds are based on a logic of ramification determining the range of possibilities that emerge from an actual state of affairs; fictional worlds are based on a logic of parallelism that guarantees their autonomy in relation to the actual world.<sup>56</sup>

However, this disturbingly approximates modal realism, which posits that every possible world is realized alongside the others and possesses an actuality of its own; but such a position is viewed skeptically by Ronen, who repeatedly defines it an ‘ontological extravagance’.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the worlds posited by AH are not as autonomous in relation to the actual world as she would have them.

The problem of fictional reference becomes particularly acute when proper names are taken into consideration. While in the actual world proper names are generally understood as rigid designators which remain associated with one individual even if the set of properties describing the individual should vary, fictional names have no referent in the real world so that one can retrace an original act of *impositio nominis*.<sup>58</sup> Matters are even more complicated in the case of characters in fiction who do have real life counterparts, and most complicated than ever in AH, where historical characters are described in ways that manifestly contradict reality. Possible Worlds theory does address, but not necessarily solve the problem of transworld identity, which is common to all mimetic fiction. Currie, for example, considers as many as four different theoretical approaches to the issue, before discarding them and presenting his own.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ronen, pp. 7-9; emphasis in the original.

<sup>56</sup> Ronen, p. 8

<sup>57</sup> Ronen, pp. 21-24.

<sup>58</sup> Pavel, pp. 37-38.

<sup>59</sup> Perhaps one of the most unproblematic views is Lewis’ ‘counterpart theory’, according to which individuals are world bound in that they exist according to one world only, although they can also have counterparts at other worlds. See Currie, Chap. 4, ‘The Characters of Fiction’, pp. 127-181 (pp. 136-141).

Ultimately, it may be that the attempt to reconcile a logical with a fictional notion of possibility is misleading, in that the conditions applied are manifestly incompatible:

Since a fictional world manifests an ontic position distinct from [...] other worlds of non-actual existence, once such a [...] distinct mode of existence is attributed to a world, this world has left the realm of the possible and it can no longer function as a variable of logical compossibility maintaining relations with worlds outside itself.<sup>60</sup>

But, if notions of ‘possible worlds’ can be applied to fictional worlds only ‘at the expense of doing justice to the logical meaning of possibility’,<sup>61</sup> it might be wiser to stop trying to reconcile categories that could be more profitably kept distinct, if only to avoid ambiguity.

Further complication is introduced by the fact that different philosophers who entertain different notions of possible worlds may not take the real universe to be a world of reference, but rather as one among many possibilities, whether they are actualized or not.<sup>62</sup> It is therefore doubtful whether the real world (or our knowledge thereof) should always be considered the ‘reference world’ that the fictional world is juxtaposed to.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, even the wildest fantasy has to bear some resemblance to the world as we know it, lest the defamiliarization effect be so extreme that it backfires for a total lack of recognition:

We construe the world of fiction and of counterfactuals as being the closest possible to the reality we know. This means that we will project upon the world of the statement everything we know about the real world, and that we will make only those adjustments which we cannot avoid.<sup>64</sup>

The most unproblematic application of Possible Worlds theory to fiction is that of reference to other fictional worlds, as in the example of the tributary nature of Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in relationship to *Hamlet*. In such instances, accessibility conditions can be shown to be operative between narratives

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<sup>60</sup> Ronen, p. 61.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>62</sup> Ronen, p. 64.

<sup>63</sup> Ronen, p. 71.

<sup>64</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Fiction, Non-Factuals and the Principle of Minimal Departure’, *Poetics* 9.4 (August 1980), 403-422 (p. 406).

shaping two worlds with the same ontological status in relation to the actual world, but dependent on one another: the states of affairs necessary in one are possible — even though they do not always obtain — in the other.<sup>65</sup> Considering fictional entities as ‘semiotic objects produced by language’ also legitimates the attribution of a different modal status to claims about the actuality or non-actuality of the fictional worlds described: fictional worlds have a logic and a truth of their own, independent from that of the real world.<sup>66</sup> Even within the same text,

a fiction is not just a nonactual possible world; it is a complete modal system centered around its own actual world, [as] we take some statements as establishing hard facts for the story world and others as describing what is merely possible or what exists only in the minds of the Characters.<sup>67</sup>

Narrative discourse as a way of making sense of experience by superimposing a casual structure to events is a universal cultural fact. Assigning truth value to what is narrated, telling true from false propositions cannot be undertaken on the basis of the discursive strategy adopted, which is common to factual reports and completely made-up stories. Indeed, truth and fantasy may be intertwined in the same text, and disentangling them might prove a vain undertaking. Linguistically, narrative texts do not *pretend* or *make believe* they assert something, they state it in as many words, whether it does or does not correspond to true facts, or does so only partially:

Narrativity is not a criterion for the fiction/non fiction distinction. [...] Whereas for imaging texts the domain of reference is given, fictional texts stipulate their referential domain by creating a possible world. The difference in truth-conditions accounts for a major difference in the reception history of imaging and fictional texts. The pictures of the actual world provided by I-texts are constantly challenged, modified, or cancelled by validation and refutation procedures. The fictional world cannot be altered or cancelled once its creator has fixed the constructing text.<sup>68</sup>

Curious that the sound philosophical scepticism in all things metaphysical should be relinquished in the face of the author-god, as if he were the one and only master of his creation, the once and future king of the realm of fiction. Things are no longer that simple — if they ever were. Such rather absolute claims do not take into due account the interaction between readers and text, which can lead to a variety of interpretations as to

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<sup>65</sup> Ronen, p. 70.

<sup>66</sup> Ronen, p. 45.

<sup>67</sup> Ryan, 2006, p. 646.

<sup>68</sup> Doležel, p. 26.

the very nature of the world constructed by the narrative, even wildly diverging from authorial intentions (whether they existed in the first place, or could be ascertained, is another matter still). Moreover, texts can exist in different versions, containing more or less substantial revisions or alterations affecting the constitution of the fictional world: indeed, this can be part and parcel of the textual structure, as is shown by the example of cooperative or ‘wiki’ texts, which are in themselves never accomplished but open to revision by several scribal entities. Other texts can contain more or less binding instructions for the reconstruction of the narrative sequence — as in Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (1963) — or marked turning points in their plot, allowing for alternative choices by the readers; in a sense, this is a constitutive feature of computer games, from the relatively rudimentary plot structure of *shoot-em-up* games, whose development and very continuation is dependent on and constantly modified by the player’s choices, to more sophisticated strategic games such as *Age of Empires*, whose logic is inherently the same as in AH.<sup>69</sup>

The truth value attributed to texts is not fixed once and for all. For example, all narratives about Greek gods became fictional once they were no longer believed to exist.<sup>70</sup> If ‘the belated fictionality of aging myths has pragmatic causes’, so does the fictionality of other texts also, established through cultural conventions subject to change.<sup>71</sup>

The ‘deeply ingrained semantic heteronomy of [fictional] texts’ has stimulated philosophical debate and given rise to creative — if somewhat abstruse — solutions.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Microsoft, *Age of Empires* (first release 1997). More explicitly modelled on AH is the computer game *Civilization III*, by Firaxis, in which diverse civilizations start competing on an equal foot, later to achieve different degrees of success and development. Interestingly, the game is said to be biased in favour of Western civilizations, which almost invariably end up as winners: see Fred Bush, ‘The Time of the Other: Alternate History and the Conquest of America’, *Strange Horizons*, 15 July 2002 <<http://www.strangehorizons.com/2002/20020715/time.shtml>> [accessed 8 July 2008]. Most probably, the initial endowment of the competitors differs in skills and potentialities, which inevitably influence the outcome, much like in sports games, where the player who selects the reputedly better teams or players has an objective advantage.

<sup>70</sup> Ronen, p. 45.

<sup>71</sup> Pavel, p. 71.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*.

‘Being existent without existing’ may make perfect philosophical sense of fictional entities, yet it may also be more hair-splitting than is good for literary theory.<sup>73</sup> The formulation is suggestively reminiscent of Auden’s abovementioned attribution to poetry of the property of making nothing happen, but being rather ‘a way of happening, a mouth’. Besides possessing the fascination of poetic language, the latter statement has the merit of capturing the peculiar essence of fictional discourse: what is narrated only happens in a manner of speaking, thanks to the act of narration itself. As one of the most resilient master narratives tells of the origins of the world, the creative act is always verbal; but this time the mouth uttering the *fiat* is mortal, therefore capable of speaking both the truth and a lie.

An example of narrative reinterpreted so as to mean effectively what it should only enact — or even parody — is given by Pavel, who hypothesizes a mime performing as a priest and blessing the audience, in a land where the religion has been banned. Both the repressed faithful and the repressive regime may take his as a genuine blessing: the former, by receiving the ‘stream of grace [that] passes through the hall’; the latter, by arresting and executing the mime.<sup>74</sup> However suggestive, the example may not be strictly relevant, as the truth value of the text (the religious ceremony) is strictly dependent on and subordinate to the performance: the identity of the performer will most likely determine the legitimacy of his role, and thus influence the reception of the performance. A more fitting antecedent than Jean de Rotrou’s 1647 tragedy *Le Véritable St Genest*<sup>75</sup> may be found in the very first story from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, in which, thanks to a false confession, the dissolute Ser Cepparello is venerated *post mortem* as Saint Ciappelletto:

E in tanto crebbe la fama della sua santità e divozione a lui, che quasi niuno era che in alcuna avversità fosse, che a altro santo che a lui si botasse, e chiamaronlo e chiamano san Ciappelletto;

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<sup>73</sup> Ronen, p. 118.

<sup>74</sup> Pavel, pp. 23-24.

<sup>75</sup> See Pavel, p. 154 Note 9.

e affermano molti miracoli Idio aver mostrati per lui e mostrare tutto giorno a chi divotamente si raccomanda a lui.<sup>76</sup>

In Boccaccio it is the false narration of the protagonist's sanctity that is taken as true, not a performative speech act like the blessing in Pavel's apologue. Cepparello does not *act* as a saint, he *tells* the confessor he has lived as one. Conversely, Rotrou's Genest *becomes* a saint while he performs, with too much realism, the role of a Christian martyr, eventually announcing his conversion on stage and openly repudiating the fiction:

Dieu m'apprend sur le champ, ce que je vous recite;  
Et vous m'entendez mal, si dans cette action,  
Mon roole passe encore pour une fiction.  
[...]  
Ce n'est plus Adrian, c'est Genest qui s'exprime;  
Ce jeu n'est plus un jeu, mais une verité,  
Où par mon action je suis représenté.<sup>77</sup>

So much for games of make-believe; although admittedly, the truth claim is part of a play-within-a-play — or a story within the story — thus at a double remove from actuality.

In spite of Doležel's confidence in the contrary, the fictional world can even be 'altered or cancelled' *after* the 'constructing text' has been 'fixed'.<sup>78</sup> Like any self-respecting creator, the author might get dissatisfied with the creation and decide to undo it totally or in part, as the hardly artistic but highly illustrative example of the improbable twists in the plot of soap operas shows, with key events demoted to dreams or visions, sudden resurrections of too hastily discarded characters, etc.

Another possibility is that the 'mouth' of Auden's metaphor keep talking after the book has been finished and published, providing further details on the fictional world or foreshadowing developments in the characters' lives, thus filling those 'gaps' which,

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<sup>76</sup> [And the fame of Ciappelletto's holiness and the devotion to him grew in such measure that scarce any there was that in any adversity would vow aught to any saint but he, and they called him and still call him San Ciappelletto, affirming that many miracles have been and daily are wrought by God through him for such as devoutly crave his intercession.] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, I. 1. XML-encoded version of the Italian text based on V. Branca (1992); translation by J.M. Rigg (1921; first printed 1903) <<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/decameron/itDecIndex.php>> [accessed 9 July 2008].

<sup>77</sup> Jean de Rotrou, *Le Véritable St Genest, tragédie de M. de Rotrou*, IV. 7. (1647) <<http://gallica2.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k707997>> [accessed 9 July 2008]

<sup>78</sup> Doležel, p. 26.

in Iser's view, it should be the reader's task to bridge in a creative effort of cooperation with the author.<sup>79</sup>

Remarkable proof that, in spite of all solemn proclamations to the contrary, the author is alive and well<sup>80</sup> — and quite talkative — has been given by J. K. Rowling's announcement that Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in her best-selling *Harry Potter* series of novels, was gay.<sup>81</sup> Since no explicit mention of his sexual preferences had been made in the series, this was in itself a perfectly legitimate interpretation of arguable textual hints that pointed in that direction; or, in terms of Possible Worlds theory applied to fiction, the actualization of one possibility within the fictional universe. However, at least two questions remain open to debate:

- 1) The degree of authority attributed to the creator of the fictional world, and if and how that authority persists after the creation is complete: Rowling went so far as correcting a script for the film version of one of the novels, which hinted at a youthful heterosexual attachment of Dumbledore's.<sup>82</sup> Obviously the contractual terms between author and film producer will reflect the respective power, with the scales probably pending on the side of the author in the case of someone as famous as Rowling; yet it is far less obvious that the author should 'know better' than anyone else those details of the fictional world that have not been specified in the text, or events that should take place beyond the temporal scope of the plot.
- 2) The ambiguity that is, as it were, woven into the very fabric of literary language. Even without subscribing to De Man's view that would 'equate

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<sup>79</sup> See Wolfgang Iser, 'Interaction between Text and Reader', in *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993; first published 1989), pp. 31-41.

<sup>80</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge and Nigel Wood, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Longman, 2008), pp. 313-316.

<sup>81</sup> Rebecca Traister, 'Dumbledore? Gay. J.K. Rowling? Chatty', *Salon*, 23 October 2007 <<http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2007/10/23/dumbledore/>> [accessed 10 July 2008]

<sup>82</sup> David Smith, 'Dumbledore Was Gay, JK Tells Amazed Fans', *Observer*, 21 October 2007.

the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself',<sup>83</sup> one has to recognize the difficulty of taking statements contained in fiction at their face value. For example, when Boccaccio refers to 'i piú gentili uomini e i piú antichi [...] di tutto il mondo o di Maremma' ['the best gentlemen and of longest descent in all the world and the Maremma', a swampy region in Tuscany], he surely is not presenting an alternate geography.<sup>84</sup> Instead, he is using a hyperbole to place what he deems a godforsaken region out of the map of the known world, but only figuratively.<sup>85</sup>

A famous example of fiction wrongly accepted as fact is provided by the 1938 radio dramatization of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, which was mistaken for the announcement of a real Martian invasion and unleashed panic among the American public. Today, the hoax could hardly be repeated in the same or in a similar form, as the audience would instantly check the rumour by turning on their TV sets or opening the homepage of their favourite news sites. Readers and viewers have neither become smarter nor more gullible, though. Quite simply, access to information has dramatically increased in scope and rapidity, which does not necessarily translate into enhanced ability to tell facts from fiction. As happened with the introduction of writing and of the printing press, the new technology does affect the circulation and storage of knowledge; what it cannot determine, however, is whether the knowledge will be put to good or bad use.

Predictably enough, after robots, supercomputers, cyborgs and genetically modified organisms, the new technological scare is Google. Its success has all but transformed the chaotic mass of information published on the internet into an effectively searchable database. Besides evoking 1984-like scenarios of omnipotent control, the evolution induces pessimists to fear that this will discourage people from investing time

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<sup>83</sup> Paul de Man, 'Semiotics and Rhetoric', in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982; first published 1979), pp. 3-19 (p. 10).

<sup>84</sup> Boccaccio, *Decameron*, VI. 6.

<sup>85</sup> The translation by 'and' felicitously expresses the ambiguity of the original conjunction 'o', which can be read both additively and adversatively.

and energy in actually learning instead of quickly retrieving ready-made knowledge from a virtually inexhaustible wealth of sources, most of which of dubious quality and reliability. However, similar apocalyptic warnings have been issued with the advent of many new technologies, with particular emphasis on those that appeared to influence not only our physical but also our mental faculties:

Their [of the creators of Google] easy assumption that we'd all 'be better off' if our brains were *supplemented*, or even *replaced*, by an artificial intelligence is unsettling. It suggests a belief that intelligence is the output of a mechanical process, a series of discrete steps that can be isolated, measured, and optimized. In Google's world, the world we enter when we go online, there's little place for the fuzziness of contemplation. Ambiguity is not an opening for insight but a bug to be fixed.<sup>86</sup>

Most famously, Socrates' warning against the introduction of writing has determined the long-standing preference in Western thought for the *logos* as living word, contrasted to its passive reproduction in written texts. Although not explicitly mentioned in the article quoted above, Derrida's magisterial debunking of the supposed indictment of writing contained in Plato's *Phaedrus* finds an echo in the use of the keyword 'supplement',<sup>87</sup> whose ambiguity in the French equivalent yields the double meaning of both 'replacement' and 'addition', just as the *pharmakon* of writing could turn out to be either 'poison' or 'remedy'. No univocal interpretation can be determined *a priori*, no single outcome is predictable.<sup>88</sup>

Hopefully, the huge amount of information instantly available on the Web will not affect our intellectual faculties any more than writing has impaired our memory — or the text of stories diminished our ability to infer their sense from the incomplete information they provide about the makeup of the world they create. In a sense, the application of Possible Worlds theory to literary texts potentially entails their openness to endless narrative deconstruction. The exploration of the possibilities left open by the

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<sup>86</sup> Nicolas Carr, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?', *Atlantic Monthly* (July/August 2008), <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>> [accessed 10 July 2008]. Emphasis added.

<sup>87</sup> See: Jacques Derrida, 'The Exorbitant. Question of Method', in *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998; first published 1976), pp 157-164.

<sup>88</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London; New York: Continuum, 2004; first published 1981), pp. 67-186.

gaps and ambiguities in the description of the fictional world, however, cannot be effected by strictly logical procedures, which would, as a rule, cancel the possibility of too widely divergent — even contradictory — readings.

A subsidiary — and surreptitious — attribution of referential meaning to fiction might be realized by isolating statements that do not belong to the plot proper, but instead express more general views: ‘Imaging digressions [or *metanarrative*] are embedded in the fictional text but express opinions (beliefs) about the actual world.’<sup>89</sup> As with any other assumptions made in the attempt to analyze fiction in logico-philosophical terms, this is debatable. The different narrative modes of fiction are in fact heavily intertwined or embedded within each other, so that for example, a speech can contain factual report, description, or comment on any subject whatsoever.<sup>90</sup> But speeches entail the exclusive responsibility of the speaker for what is said, therefore many different, even contradictory opinions can coexist within the same text and make it harder — if possible at all — to establish one system of belief that belongs to the fictional world as a whole, with a definite and consistent hierarchy of values.

Even metanarrative comment that is not embedded in speeches by any of the characters reflects the views of the narrator, which need not coincide with those of the author: philosophers may think otherwise, but this one of the basic tenets of narratology.<sup>91</sup> When at the outset of *Pride and Prejudice* it is confidently asserted as ‘a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife’, the statement certainly expresses the narrator’s beliefs, which need not have been shared by Jane Austen or consistently applied to her private life. Indeed, the ‘truth’ is ‘universally acknowledged’ *within* the fictional world, and reflects a socio-ethical system which, once again, need not automatically correspond to the one in force

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<sup>89</sup> Doležel, p. 27.

<sup>90</sup> See: Helmut. Bonheim, *The Narrative Modes: Techniques of the Short Story* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1982).

<sup>91</sup> For a sophisticated and detailed exposition of the techniques of narratological analysis in general, and of the author-narrator distinction in particular, see: Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

in the society of the time — or in any concrete society at any time in human history for that matter.

Safer, in terms of reference and authentication — and more consonant with a ‘conservative’ theory of fiction<sup>92</sup> — is the attempt to ‘anchor the characters to the real world via a reference to the story rather [than] to the author’.<sup>93</sup> Which, however, does not solve all problems yet, as a fictional story is *not* about the real world in the first place, although its interpretation will take our knowledge of the real world as the starting point:

Our semantics rests on one basic ontological assumption: to exist actually is to exist independently of semiotic representation; to exist fictionally means to exist as a possible constructed by semiotic means. In other words, fictional worlds are a special kind of possibles, possibles brought into fictional existence.<sup>94</sup>

Perhaps ‘possible’ is a misleading term when applied to fictional worlds, as it appears to perpetuate the dependence on the real world for their validation. Modal logic can be fruitfully applied to fictional worlds, provided the determination of what is true, false, necessary, contingent, possible or impossible be anchored to the fictional world as an independent reality with its own states of affairs.

Recent evolution in philosophical theories has effected a relaxation of logical standards, from ‘*a correspondence theory of truth*, according to which the truth value of propositions is determined by a corresponding state of affairs obtaining in the world’, to ‘*a pragmatic theory of truth*, [in which] epistemological considerations [are] disconnected [...] from the ability to refer’:

A statement or proposition can be true in some sense even if what the proposition refers to [...] does not exist (or we cannot definitely know if it exists or no).<sup>95</sup>

However, ‘modal operators that define and delimit fictional discourse’ are regarded differently by philosophers and literary theorists, as the latter are not interested in the solution to the truth-value-problem of fiction; they regard fictionality as ‘a global strategy of texts [that] secures the autonomy of a fictional universe’, rather than a way of

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<sup>92</sup> Currie, p. 217.

<sup>93</sup> Currie, p. 153 Note 23.

<sup>94</sup> Doležel p. 145.

<sup>95</sup> Ronen, pp. 35-36.

separating propositions about existents from those about nonexistent.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, merely prefixing a modal operator to the text does not solve the problem of the existence of extrafictional objects within fiction: AH is definitely a case in point.

AH is inevitably subject to a mixed validation: as fiction, it rests on an independent ontology from the actual world; as possible historical alternative, it must be compared to the records it contradicts, so that its plausibility may be tested. The two procedures can clash as the causality chain of the narrative might involve anachronism or any other sort of logical impossibility, which would exclude the fictional world from the domain of possible worlds depending from the actual world for their validation.

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<sup>96</sup> Ronen, p. 38.

### 1.2.2. AH, Historiography, and Historical Fiction

Minimal, incoherent fragments:

The opposite of History, creator of ruins.

(Octavio Paz, 'Objects & Apparitions:  
For Joseph Cornell'; trans. by Elizabeth Bishop)

Every narrative entails an arrangement, an order superimposed on the chaotic flux of events. The dichotomy always presupposes a pre-existing reality which is given form and meaning by a narrating entity, selecting meaningful events and disposing them in an order that, besides leaving ellipses in the reconstruction, may not respect the canonical temporal sequence from beginning to end. Thus an opposition can be established between the *fabula* and *suzjet* of Russian formalism, or the *fabula* and *story* of Bal's narratology, or, in a famous theorization not exempt from ambiguity and faults but possessing, nonetheless, the rhetorical appeal of a classic, between *story* and *plot*:

We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died, and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief' is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. [...] Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: 'And then?' If it is in a plot we ask: 'Why?'<sup>97</sup>

In effect, matters can be both simpler and more complicated. More complicated, because Forster's opposition does not clearly distinguish — as other couples of terms do — between the preservation and the alteration of a linear time sequence, for example through the use of flashback or anticipation. Simpler, on the other hand, because the juxtaposition of the two events — 'the king died, and then the queen died' — already supplies a causal link that even the least imaginative of readers will have no difficulties in recognizing: 'Tout récit répond à la question *pourquoi* ? en même temps qu'il répond à la question *quoi* ? ; dire ce qui est arrivé, c'est dire pourquoi cela est arrivé.'<sup>98</sup> For all Forster's protestations that stories should be fed to 'a gaping audience of cave-men or to a tyrannical sultan or their modern descendant the movie public' whereas more sophisticated audiences should prefer the 'intelligence and memory' demanded by plots,

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<sup>97</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin, 1990; first published 1927), p. 87.

<sup>98</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, 3 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1983-85), I, 215.

the opposite might just be true.<sup>99</sup> The explicit mention of the cause of the queen's death might be redundant and didascallic in its excessive explicitness, whereas the mere juxtaposition of the two deaths is more economical in the display of rhetoric, treating the tragedy with just the emotional restraint that highbrow readers are more likely to appreciate.

As a series of events linked and made coherent by causation, every narrative could be defined as a 'history' of something or someone. The role of narrative in historical discourse has been 'the subject of extraordinarily intense debate', traditionally centred on the question of the supposed objectivity of the reconstruction of the past as opposed to the historian's interpretation, set in a dissertative — rather than narrative — mode.<sup>100</sup> In fact, a judgemental aspect is always already present in the narrative account insofar as it rearranges the materials derived from the analysis of documents, by deviating from sheer chronology and providing the events with the *sense of an ending*:<sup>101</sup>

A *sequential* account of a set of events is not the same as a narrative account thereof. And the difference between them is the absence of any interest in teleology as an explanatory principle in the former. Any narrative account of anything whatsoever is a teleological account.<sup>102</sup>

However inextricably enmeshed with the factual report, the amount of rhetoric need not be exorbitant, nor its use overtly manifest. In an example similar to the deaths of the royals narrated by Forster, the medieval annalist of Saint Gall provides an embryonic — if not fully fledged — narrative in the entry for 1056: 'The Emperor Henry died; and his son Henry succeeded to the rule.'<sup>103</sup> The causal link for the succession is constituted by the implicit reference to the *Lex Salica*; the annalist does not have to make explicit the legitimacy of the act, which is already known to the implied reader. Likewise, in Forster's example the inference that the queen's death was caused by the

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<sup>99</sup> Forster, p. 87.

<sup>100</sup> Hayden White, 'The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory', in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 26-57 (p. 26).

<sup>101</sup> See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>102</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 217 Note 2. See also: Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

<sup>103</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 14.

previous death of her beloved husband is readily available to readers without their being prompted to make it. Whether the narrative account be factual or fictional, much the same interpretive procedures are at play.

De Certeau suggestively associates medicine and historiography in their common nature of discourse about two kinds of *other* — the human body and the past, respectively — both deprived of the possibility to speak for themselves, but in need of being decoded:

Une médecine et une historiographie modernes naissent presque simultanément du clivage entre un sujet supposé savoir lire, et un objet supposé écrit dans une langue qui ne se connaît pas, mais doit être décodée.<sup>104</sup>

In AH, the body of the past is not only examined and dissected but recomposed in a new, chimerical assembly that more often than not reflects modern preoccupations and superimposes on known events a different pattern, derived from hindsight. In a sense, all historiography does the same, while declaring a respect for the facts that may be confined to lip service rather than translated into practice, for reasons very similar to those producing an inevitable split between any event and even its most purportedly faithful narrative representation.

Historiography operates through a process of selection, of distancing between the observer and the observed:

L'histoire moderne occidentale [...] suppose un décalage entre l'opacité silencieuse de la 'réalité' qu'elle cherche à dire, et la place où elle produit son discours, protégée par une mise à distance de son ob-jet (*Gegen-stand*): [...] *l'intelligibilité s'instaure dans un rapport à l'autre.*<sup>105</sup>

This is also the *modus operandi* of any discourse whose ambition is detachment from the object described, statically or through time, i.e. in a narrative: 'Le langage n'a-t-il pas pour statut d'impliquer, mais de poser comme autre que lui, la réalité dont il parle?'<sup>106</sup>

There needs must be a selection of materials according to their relevance, and effected through phases. First of all the object of discourse must be chosen. In historiography, the selection may be operated through space (a geographic area), time (a period), and/or

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<sup>104</sup> Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002; first published 1975), p. 16.

<sup>105</sup> Certeau, p. 15.

<sup>106</sup> Certeau, p. 38.

theme (diplomatic-military versus economic history, etc.); all such distinctions are arbitrary, as even the cohesion and boundaries of, for example, ‘Europe’ or ‘the Mediterranean area’ are debatable. Then, from the reality to be analyzed those aspects and events that are deemed representative for the whole must be selected, highlighted, and disposed in a meaningful order.

One crucial difference between historiography and fiction is that the raw materials for the subsequent arrangement in the text are real in the case of history, nonexistent in that of fiction. The pre-existing *fabula* of narrative theory is an abstraction that can only be inferred from the course of events similar to those in the fiction, whereas how events developed in history can be ascertained, however partially, and compared to their treatment in the historical reconstruction. Historical fiction partakes of both modes, as the discrepancy between the facts and their arrangement can be measured only with respect to the general historical picture and those characters in the fiction who have real life counterparts.

The writing of AH operates through the double selection that is common to all narratives: of the object of the text, and of those among its parts that will be subsequently arranged in a meaningful order. AH is akin to historical fiction in that its materials will be both selected from historical reality and invented. However, it requires another, intermediate process of selection: from the actuality of history one possible alternative will be extrapolated and developed. In this respect, *allo*-history inherently recovers one of those forms of *otherness* that official historiography, in its rationalizing furore, tends to obliterate:

L’autre est le fantasme de l’historiographie. L’objet qu’elle cherche, qu’elle honore et qu’elle enterre. [...] Ce projet, contradictoire, vise à ‘comprendre’ et à cacher avec le ‘sens’ l’altérité de cet étranger, ou, ce qui revient au même, à calmer les morts qui hantent encore le présent et à leur offrir des tombeaux scripturaires.<sup>107</sup>

What takes place in AH is, rather than the celebration of the dead past and its definitive interment, the comeback of one of those possible pasts that still haunt the collective

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<sup>107</sup> Certeau, p. 14.

consciousness — particularly so, when the alternative hypothesis is developed so as to include the present day and show us not so much how different (*other*) we were as how different we could have been from what we are *now*.

The production of historical discourse is not only a matter of sequencing according to a paradigm or thesis to be demonstrated but also of choice. From the mass of documents available the historian will select and analyze only some, dismissing others or relegating them to the background: ‘En histoire, tout commence avec le geste de mettre à part, de rassembler, de muer ainsi en “documents” certains objets répartis autrement.’<sup>108</sup> Consequently, the historian must make sense of the data collected, an operation actually begun with the very individuation of the object of study and the postulation of hypotheses to be verified through the analysis of the documents. The resulting structure will superimpose meaning upon the past by the establishment of a causal chain:

L’idée de ‘production’ [by historiography] transpose la conception ancienne d’une ‘causalité’ et distingue deux types de problèmes : d’une part le renvoi du ‘fait’ à ce qui l’a *rendu possible* ; d’autre part une *cohérence* ou un ‘enchaînement’ entre les phénomènes constatés. La première question se traduit en termes de *genèse*, et privilégie indéfiniment ce qui est ‘*avant*’ ; la seconde s’exprime sous la forme de *séries* dont la constitution appelle, de la part de l’historien, le souci quasi obsédant de combler les *lacunes* et tient lieu, plus ou moins métaphoriquement, de structure. Les deux éléments, souvent réduits à n’être plus qu’une filiation et un ordre, se conjuguent dans le ‘quasi concept’ de temporalité.<sup>109</sup>

The delusion of a supposedly clearcut distinction between facts and fiction has been exposed, most famously, by Hayden White, who pointed to the common discursive practices adopted by both historians and novelists: ‘History is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation.’<sup>110</sup> The kinship is particularly evident in historical fiction, which shares most of the referential scope of historiography, and even more so in that hybrid, challenging form that is AH in its fictional — rather than historiographically counterfactual — form: rhetorically, all but indistinguishable

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<sup>108</sup> Certeau, p. 100.

<sup>109</sup> Certeau, pp. 27-28.

<sup>110</sup> Hayden White, ‘Fictions of Factual Representation’, in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 121-134 (p. 122).

from other historical fictions; referentially, more fundamentally fictional than any realistic fiction, which does not contradict the received version of history.

The close intertwining of history and fiction has also been acknowledged by Paul Ricoeur:

Par entrecroisement de l'histoire et de la fiction, nous entendons la structure fondamentale, tant ontologique qu'épistémologique, en vertu de laquelle l'histoire et la fiction ne concrétisent chacune leur intentionnalité qu'empruntant à l'intentionnalité de l'autre.<sup>111</sup>

However, he also tries to keep fictional and historical narratives — by the latter he means historiography — distinct in terms of reference, when he explains:

Je réserve [...] le terme de fiction pour celles des créations littéraires qui ignorent l'ambition qu'a le récit historique de constituer un récit vrai. Si, en effet, nous tenons pour synonymes configuration et fiction, nous n'avons plus de terme disponible pour rendre compte d'un rapport différent entre les deux modes narratives et la question de la vérité. [...] Ce qui [...] oppose [le récit historique et le récit de fiction] ne concerne pas l'activité structurante investie dans les structures narratives en tant que telles, mais la prétention à la vérité.<sup>112</sup>

Thus, whereas Ricoeur, although fully aware of the similarities in terms of discursive strategy, maintains the ontological distinction between the respective subject matter of fiction and historiography, White sees a definite overlap between them as narrative forms:

No given set of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events. [...] The effect of such emplotment can be regarded as an explanation, but [...] the generalizations that serve the functions of universals in any version of a nomological-deductive argument are the *topoi* of literary plots, rather than the causal laws of science.<sup>113</sup>

White's identification of the four tropological modes of Metaphor, Synecdoche, Metonymy, and Irony, which should govern the emplotment of history according to the narrative forms of Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire (borrowed from the typology in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957), may be debatable both as a comprehensive classification and in the attribution of single historiographic works to one

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<sup>111</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, III, 264-279 (p. 265).

<sup>112</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, II (1984), 12.

<sup>113</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 44.

or the other mode;<sup>114</sup> yet it also represents a watershed, after which the identification between historiography and history as the *form* that cannot be separated from its *content* is no longer to be thought away, nor is the acknowledgment of the crucial role played, in the work of the historian, by much the same *Rhetoric of Fiction* (as in the namesake seminal work by Wayne Booth, 1961) that is deployed in the work of the novelist:

The historical narrative [...] test[s] the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of 'imaginary' events.<sup>115</sup>

However in keeping with his theories, White's use of the same denomination for historiography — i.e., 'historical narrative' — as the one chosen by Ricoeur may ingenerate some terminological confusion with works of fiction on historical subjects, for which, therefore, the label 'historical fiction' [HF] has been preferred in this study; although it may sound as an ontological oxymoron, it does offer some disambiguating advantage.

The reticence to acknowledge their indebtedness to techniques borrowed from the writing of fiction may be understandable in historians, as it appears to undermine the attempt to establish their profession as a discipline on a par with the other sciences, whose procedures are based on the application of rigorous paradigms rather than the concoction of 'literary artifacts'. Yet the adequate description of human events does imply, almost inevitably, their casting into a discursive form that be recognizable, chosen among those available in a given culture for the description of human activities in time, whether they be real or fictional: 'One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less "true" for being imaginary.'<sup>116</sup>

The ramifications are also momentous for counterhistorical discourse. If the *form* of emplotment encodes the narrative of past events so as to predetermine, to a large extent, its reception and interpretation, the same events may be understood to tell each

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<sup>114</sup> The theory is expounded in the Introduction to *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 1-42, and applied to the work of various historians and philosophers in the subsequent chapters.

<sup>115</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 45.

<sup>116</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 57.

time a different history. Indeed, the next logical step is the modification of the *content* itself, which is already, to some extent, an interpretation, an artificial representation of an object — the past — that cannot be experienced directly. This operation has been made possible on a larger scale, and more easily acceptable, by the previous acceptance as a fact that the writing of history proceeds along the same lines and strategies as the writing of fiction, not only rhetorically but also structurally.

The *story* that represents the basis for the emplotment of history is, in turn, an elaboration of the essentially chronological reconstruction of the *chronicle*:<sup>117</sup>

The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end.<sup>118</sup>

More importantly still, like any other narrative the historiographic account contains, in its structure, those choices by the protagonists of the action that represent as many potential turning points, leading to different outcomes. The history-teller may have constructed the tale so that it yields the desired ending, corresponding to the judgement passed upon the events; this will not prevent others from telling a different story from the same materials, indeed the narrative form itself calls for revision — or even reversal. Once the mediated nature of historical records has been acknowledged in the artificiality of the process of selection and preliminary interpretation of the documents, these *ontological building bricks*<sup>119</sup> of the past may not only be assembled according to a different pattern but replaced by other materials, which will be more easily accepted insofar as they had also been there, moulded from the clay of events, but later cracked in the oven, or were otherwise discarded by the architects of history.

Ricoeur cursorily mentions — but does not explicitly analyze as the generating principle of AH — this aspect of the intertwining of history and fiction, of the circular

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<sup>117</sup> In a chronicle, ‘the order of the discourse follows the order of chronology [...] and cannot, therefore, offer the kind of meaning that a narratologically governed account can be said to provide’: White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 17.

<sup>118</sup> White, *Metahistory*, p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 189. See also Georg Henrik von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

relationship between the *quasi-passé* shaped by narrative reference to events prior to the time of enunciation and the fictional element in historical reconstructions, creating in turn the *quasi-présence* of past events before the eyes of the reader:

S'il est vrai qu'une des fonctions de la fiction, mêlée à l'histoire, est de libérer rétrospectivement certaines possibilités non effectuées du passé historique, c'est à la faveur de son caractère quasi historique que la fiction elle-même peut exercer *après coup* sa fonction libératrice. Le *quasi-passé* de la fiction devient ainsi le détecteur des *possibles enfouis dans le passé effectif*.<sup>120</sup>

Unlike science, whose data are collected on the field and whose theories can be tested in a laboratory, history cannot be based on the direct observation of its object, as the reconstruction of past events will always be fragmentary and arbitrary, and result in the 'apparente servitude de l'historien de n'être jamais devant son objet passé, mais devant sa trace':

Reconstituer un événement ou plutôt une série d'événements [...] suppose que le document soit interrogé, forcé à parler ; que l'historien aille à la rencontre de son sens, en lançant vers lui une hypothèse de travail : c'est cette recherche qui à la fois élève la trace à la dignité de document signifiant, et élève le passé lui-même à la dignité de fait historique. Le document n'était pas document avant que l'historien n'ait songé à lui poser une question.<sup>121</sup>

Moreover, hypotheses on alternative outcomes cannot be tested by altering one or more factors and recording the consequences of the alteration; although what did happen might not have been inevitable, there is no proof of the contrary.

The historian's analysis of the past is thus twice removed from its object; by time, which will have erased many traces and made others barely intelligible from a modern viewpoint; by language, as the reconstruction is mediated by discourse:

L'*historiographie* (c'est-à-dire 'histoire et 'écriture') porte inscrit dans son nom propre le paradoxe — et quasi l'oxymoron — de la mise en relation de deux termes antinomiques: le réel et le discours.<sup>122</sup>

The result, therefore, will never be the return to life of the past in its integrity:

L'histoire n'a pas pour ambition de faire *revivre*, mais de re-composer, de re-constituer [...] un enchaînement rétrospectif. L'objectivité de l'histoire consiste précisément dans ce renoncement à coïncider, à revivre, dans cette ambition d'élaborer des enchaînements de fait au niveau d'une intelligence historique. [...] Car il n'y a pas d'*explication* sans constitution de 'séries' de

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<sup>120</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, III, 278; emphasis in the original.

<sup>121</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), p. 28.

<sup>122</sup> Certeau, p. 11.

phénomènes. [...] Il n'y a de synthèse historique que parce que d'abord l'histoire est une analyse. [...] L'historien cherche des relations entre les phénomènes qu'il à distingués.<sup>123</sup>

The selection of facts and the establishment of causal links between them corresponds to the *emplotment* identified by Hayden White as the standard procedure for historians and novelists alike; it may elucidate the events more or less clearly, but the knowledge will always be by proxy — and the real thing irretrievably out of reach.

The historian's frustration before the elusiveness of the object of his study is suggestively expressed, once more, by a fictional representative of the category, the protagonist of David Bradley's neo-slave narrative *The Chaneysville Incident*:

History is a dinosaur. To precisely what genus and species it belongs is difficult to say—possibly it is a triceratops, but most likely it is a brontosaurus, a large, gray-green thing, so large and cumbersome that to the uninitiated, its head appears to be in only vague and intermittent contact with its tail. It is cold-blooded, taking whatever warmth and passion it might possess from its surroundings. It is so far-flung of extremity and so limited in terms of central nervous capacity that, while it may have some dim sense of purpose, its movements are effectively aimless. It is, in general, slow-moving, but its speed may vary; at times it seems to leap forward with a velocity that fools the eye, at times it seems not to be moving at all. But it does move. Always. And always forward. And as it goes it knocks over everything in its path, not out of malice, or even out of indifference, but simply because it is too ponderous and stupid to notice. It is a minor miracle that history is not, like the other Great Lizards, extinct. But there are strong indications that this will soon be the case.<sup>124</sup>

Once more, as in Maurois, the author evokes the image of the place where all the historian's tribulations shall cease, all the puzzles will be solved, his thirst for knowledge quenched, and no questions shall go unanswered:

We still believe that, by whatever haphazard means, the past is created, fixed; that its understanding depends on finding out exactly when whoever did whatever to whomever. Some of us get a little crazy about it, but most of us have learned to accept the idea that we will never know everything, so long as we labor here below. But we also believe in Historians' Heaven: a firmly fixed chamber far removed from the subjective uncertainties of this mortal coil, where there is a gallery of pictures of the dinosaur taken constantly from every angle, and motion pictures, and cross sections. And we believe that if we have been good little historians, just before they do whatever it is they finally do with us, they'll take us in there and show us what was *really* going on. It's not that we want so much to know we were right. We *know* we're not right (although it would be nice to see exactly how close we came). It's just that we want to, really, truly, utterly, absolutely, completely, finally, *know*.<sup>125</sup>

The unknowability of the past, the inanity of any attempt to find out the truth behind the documents is what makes of Roquentin in Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938) such an

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<sup>123</sup> Certeau, p. 29.

<sup>124</sup> David Bradley, *The Chaneysville Incident* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 262-263.

<sup>125</sup> Bradley, p. 264.

unsuccessful historian.<sup>126</sup> It is also what inspires such postmodernist contaminations of history and fiction as DeLillo's *Libra* — an account of the plot to murder J. F. Kennedy, focussed on the figure of Lee Harvey Oswald — and O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*, which recounts the tragic confrontation of a Vietnam veteran turned political wannabe with his past.<sup>127</sup> Perhaps novelists are better equipped than historians to make sense of a world in which reliable information is scarce and discernible patterns even more so. It might be a self-delusory undertaking to try 'tracking where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins', as Philip Roth purports to do in *TPAA* by appending basic historical information to the narrative proper in the form of 'A True Chronology' of the major historical figures in the Work plus 'Some Documentation'.<sup>128</sup> While some modern historians — unlike their classic predecessors, who were more attuned to the literary modes of their time — are 'unself-consciously rhetorical', writers of fiction are more conscious of the rhetorical tools of their craft, which may allow them to devise better, more convincing plots:<sup>129</sup>

Many historians continue to treat their 'facts' as though they were 'given' and refuse to recognize, unlike most scientists, that they are not so much found as constructed by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him. It is the same notion of objectivity that binds historians to an uncritical use of the chronological framework for their narratives. When historians try to relate their 'findings' about the 'facts' in what they call an 'artistic' manner, they uniformly eschew the techniques of literary representation which Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen have contributed to modern culture. [...] It is almost as if the historians believed that the *sole possible form* of historical narration was that used in the English novel as it had developed by the late nineteenth century.<sup>130</sup>

White may have been ungenerous or expected too much of the historians' stylistic skills, and it is doubtful whether a historiography *à la* Joyce would be more effective.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> See also White, *Tropics of Discourse*, pp. 37-39.

<sup>127</sup> Don DeLillo, *Libra* (London: Penguin, 2006; first published 1988). Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* (London: Penguin, 1995; first published 1994). Born in Austin (Minnesota) in 1946, Tim O'Brien served in Vietnam as a foot soldier. After abandoning graduate studies at Harvard, he became a reporter for the *Washington Post*, and embarked on a writing career after the publication of his war memoirs *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973).

<sup>128</sup> *TPAA*, pp. 365-391.

<sup>129</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 114.

<sup>130</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>131</sup> One is reminded of Borges' remark that 'each language is a tradition [and] the changes that an innovator may make are trifling — we should remember the dazzling but often unreadable work of a Mallarmé or a Joyce'. Jorge Luis Borges, 'Foreword' to *Brodie's Report* (1970), in *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin, 1999), pp. 345-347 (p. 346).

Moreover, modern historical discourse has also adopted less narrative and more argumentative forms, as in the work of the French school of the *Annales*.<sup>132</sup> Yet it is true that even when exploring the previously forbidden territory of sustained counterfactual speculation, historians are mostly wary of experimentalism and prefer a conventional form, in which the narration is rather anecdotal and interspersed with authorial comment, argumentation and digression, without any total commitment to the alternate version of reality presented; rather, readers are constantly kept aware that they are faced with a hypothesis and not with a truthful account, and more often than not the game of make-believe is played only half-heartedly. Perhaps, in the final analysis, Aristotle's poetry / history distinction is still valid:

It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen — what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. [...] The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. [...] And even if he [the poet] chanced to take a historical subject, he is none the less a poet; for there is no reason why some events that have actually happened should not conform to the law of the probable and possible, and in virtue of that quality in them he is their poet or maker.<sup>133</sup>

In its exploration of the hazy border zone between history and fiction — neither 'what has happened' nor 'what may happen', but rather what could have happened — AH might constitute a pragmatic form of *metahistory*, no less precious and insightful than are theoretical elaborations on the form and object of historiography on the one hand, and on the nature of fiction on the other hand.

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<sup>132</sup> Named after the homonymous historical journal founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Paul Victor Febvre in 1929, the *Annales* school advocated a historiography based on the comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis of a period, with particular focus on long-term factors such as socio-economic structure — even geography and climate — rather than diplomatic or military events. Ricoeur describes 'L'éclipse de l'événement dans l'historiographie française' in *Temps et récit*, I, 138-159.

<sup>133</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, IX, trans. by S.H. Butcher <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/aristotle-poeticsi.txt>> [accessed 29 April 2008].

### 1.2.3. AH and Historical Counterfactuals

He who will know fully the vanity of man has only to consider the causes and effects of love. The cause is a je ne sais quoi (Corneille), and the effects are dreadful. This je ne sais quoi, so small an object that we cannot recognise it, agitates a whole country, princes, armies, the entire world. Cleopatra's nose: had it been shorter, the whole aspect of the world would have been altered.

(Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 162; trans. by W. F. Trotter)

When discourse — whether narrative or argumentative — based on actual history gives way to speculation, either in the form of counterfactual analysis or of ‘fantastic historiography’,<sup>134</sup> the resulting (sub)genre can be represented as a two-faced Janus, with SF proper pointing to a future which, however fictional, still belongs to the realm of possibility, whereas AH faces the past, but a past divorced from actuality and giving substance to one of the many, unrealized alternatives.

Traditionally, professional historians have been wary of such endeavours, which involve ‘a conditional statement of the form “If ..., then,” with the antecedent known to be false but taken as true’:<sup>135</sup>

The merely possible is not something we can test, and it is not something we can use the techniques of historians to analyze. No diary can note what would have happened, no newspaper can report what would have happened, indeed, there seem to be no original sources at all to indicate what might have happened. Statements about what might have happened seem at best speculation, and at worst sheer fancy.<sup>136</sup>

However, historians have always employed counterfactual reasoning in their arguments, whether explicitly or implicitly:

Historians and social scientists use counterfactuals regularly though implicitly when they assign *necessary* causes, and sometimes in assigning degrees of importance to causes. The assignment of necessary causes assumes that had the causes not occurred, neither would the effects.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 368-370.

<sup>135</sup> Martin Bunzl, ‘Counterfactual History: A User’s Guide’. *American Historical Review*, 109.3 (June 2004) <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/109.3/bunzl.html>> [accessed 14 November 2006] (para. 9 of 35).

<sup>136</sup> Johannes Bulhof, ‘What If? Modality and History’, *History and Theory*, 38.2 (May 1999), 145-168 (pp. 145-146).

<sup>137</sup> Aviezer Tucker, ‘Historiographical Counterfactuals and Historical Contingency’, *History and Theory*, 38.2 (1999), 264-276 (p. 265).

Thus, ‘modal claims lie at the heart of the historical project’, and the same applies to judgements about good and bad leadership: ‘Making the right choice is [...] a comparison of different alternative outcomes of the different possible options available.’<sup>138</sup>

Curiously, even those who plead for the acceptance of counterfactual arguments in historical discourse tend to underestimate the rhetorical power of a narratively construed sequence of events to establish a causal chain even without an explicit claim to that effect, and fail to understand that, Humpty Dumpty-like, ‘a historical sequence is what the historian says it is’:<sup>139</sup>

If we merely focused on what happened, we would be able to say that diseases the Europeans brought killed ninety to ninety-five percent of the local population [in the American colonies], and that the Europeans settled into the depopulated areas, but we would not be able to say that the diseases were part of the cause of the success of the settlement. Instead of a connection between the two events, we would be left with the mere juxtaposition of two events in space and time. Surely such a story misses an interesting point.<sup>140</sup>

Perhaps it is Bulhof who misses an interesting point that would further substantiate his claim that historians inevitably recur to counterfactuals, even when they do not state them explicitly by identifying an event as the cause of a successive event, which in turn would not have taken place but for the existence of the cause. However, this has hardly been acknowledged in traditional historiography. But now the tide has changed,<sup>141</sup> although the status of counterfactual reasoning applied to history is still open to debate.

Unlike logic, history is not quite different from zoology in its concern with the real world rather than with an abstraction.<sup>142</sup> Granted, our knowledge of the world — and of the past in particular — relies more often on cultural constructs than on experience, on one’s encyclopaedia rather than reality as a given.<sup>143</sup> Thus, textuality may well be the default modality of access to history; as De man famously stated, ‘the bases for historical

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<sup>138</sup> Bulhof, p. 147.

<sup>139</sup> Michael Shermer, ‘Exorcising Laplace’s Demon: Chaos and Antichaos, History and Metahistory’, *History and Theory*, 34.1 (February 1995), 59-83 ( p. 71).

<sup>140</sup> Bulhof, p. 155.

<sup>141</sup> Particularly so after the publication of: Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Picador, 1997).

<sup>142</sup> Ronen, p. 64.

<sup>143</sup> Ronen, p. 70.

knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions'.<sup>144</sup> In fact, one should always keep in mind, while considering the received version of history, that it is received, and it is a version.

Yet there are limits to historical interpretation, to the possibility of alternative highlighting or downplaying of the records. We may have abandoned the idea of attaining knowledge of the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* — in Ranke's famous phrase<sup>145</sup> — but in history's kitchen one cannot overcook the books without irremediably spoiling the recipe. Either fiction is a wild card legitimizing any kind of modification of historical records, the most unlikely or fantastic not excepted — since 'logical possibility is not necessarily a valid criterion in the construction of fictional worlds'<sup>146</sup> — or the possibility constraint of referential texts is operative for all fictions dealing with history, which is obviously not the case; it is precisely AH that constitutes a cross-boundary region wherein the emplotment of history is overtly thematized and allows for the exploration (whether by professional historians or authors of fiction) of the possibilities of historical fictions within stricter conditions than those generally operative for fictional texts, to which, in the 'long tradition from Plato to Russell', truth conditions were said not to be applicable.<sup>147</sup>

Once more, AH is a useful touchstone in that, even within the stricter criteria imposed by counterfactual historical speculation, it explores alternative paths that could have belonged to the realm of possibilities in the past; hardly any such constriction is operative, by contrast, in fictional AH, whose connection to history as we know it can be much looser and make it border on Fantasy, which is generally set in a-historical time

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<sup>144</sup> Paul De Man, 'Literary History and Literary Modernity', in *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 142-165 (p. 165).

<sup>145</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. by Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis; New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973). However, the editors warn that the usual translation of 'eigentlich' with 'actually' may be misleading and not cover the contemporary additional meaning of 'characteristically, essentially', which is 'much more in keeping with Ranke's philosophical ideas. It is not factuality, but the emphasis on the essential that makes an account historical' ('Introduction', pp. xix-xx).

<sup>146</sup> Ronen, p. 60.

<sup>147</sup> Ronen, p. 20.

and space, frequently accommodating supernatural elements within its ontological frame. Thus, contrary to what happens with counterfactuals, in some alternate histories one cannot ‘infer or determine the truth of propositions about possible worlds by relying on their similarity or closeness to the state of affairs actually realized’, as the state of affairs in the actual world is not close enough and there are no applicable ‘standards of validation’.<sup>148</sup> Ronen’s distinction between counterfactuals and fictional claims could be more misleading than clarifying, as in AH fictional claims are, inevitably and contrary to what Ronen maintains, ‘interpreted as referring to the ways the actual world could have been’ — as is the case with counterfactuals.<sup>149</sup>

Perhaps, we could posit a comprehensive notion able to accommodate both historical counterfactuals and fictional AH in a special category of *world-constructing texts*, bordering on *world-imaging texts*<sup>150</sup> in that the world they shape is inevitably and explicitly compared to the real world, although the validation criteria are stricter for historical counterfactuals; an invasion of sentient lizards from outer space bringing WWII to a halt and humans to form a makeshift coalition can appear in AH —as it does in a Turtledove series of novels<sup>151</sup> — without causing as much as the raising of an eyebrow, whereas much less fantastic alterations would make any readers of historical counterfactuals wince:

Libraries and bookstores stock alternate history novels in the science fiction section [...]. You won’t find such books in the history section, although that is likely where their authors spend time browsing. Many of these volumes are intellectually rigorous.<sup>152</sup>

Evidently, the claim that ‘the fictional world system is an independent system *whatever the type of fiction constructed*’ does not automatically apply to AH.<sup>153</sup> Rather, the series

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<sup>148</sup> Ronen, pp. 62-63.

<sup>149</sup> Ronen, p. 92.

<sup>150</sup> See Doležal, p. 24.

<sup>151</sup> Harry Tutledove’s *Worldwar & Colonization* series comprises eight volumes to date: see ‘Turtledove, Harry: *Worldwar & Colonization*’, in *Uchronia* <<http://www.uchronia.net/bib.cgi/label.html?id=turtworldw>> [accessed 11 September 2008]. Short synopses of the first three volumes are available in *Science Fiction Weekly*, 2.35 (2 December 1996) <<http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue35/worldwar.html>> [accessed 20 July 2008].

<sup>152</sup> Dudek.

<sup>153</sup> Ronen, p. 12; emphasis added.

of alternative choices, which can constitute an approach to plot different from the chronological sequence usually applied in structuralist models of fiction, could hardly be validated, in AH, without reference to the actual state of historical affairs;<sup>154</sup> therefore, the ‘unique status of fictional narrative that constructs and refers to its own universe’ may not be so unique after all.<sup>155</sup>

New labels should be adopted carefully and only when they provide added explanatory value; with this proviso, their introduction is sometimes inevitable, and helpful when realized according to clear and consistent criteria: hopefully, this will be the case with the following classification. Within the general field of alternate history [AH], what distinguishes historical counterfactuals [HC] from allohistorical fiction [AF] is not the content in terms of reference: both are counterfactuals in that they describe states of affairs which never obtained.<sup>156</sup> Nor is it necessarily — although it often is — a matter of discursive strategy:

The trademark of fiction, as opposed to other nonfactuals, is the grammatical factuality of a very large proportion of the statements that make it up: fiction is overwhelmingly told in the indicative mode.<sup>157</sup>

Authors of HC normally adopt an argumentative form, and even when they do write straightforward narrative accounts, they are usually shorter, sketchier, and more self-conscious in the use of rhetorical devices and dialogue than are the alternative histories written by authors of fiction:

Keep it short. [...] The genre lends itself naturally to the essay rather than to the book. [...] When the conceit is extended across hundreds of pages [...] it tends towards overstretch. [...] Just as in a game of billiards one might be able to predict what will happen when ball A hits ball B, [...] it

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<sup>154</sup> Ronen, pp. 167-174.

<sup>155</sup> Ronen, p. 174.

<sup>156</sup> Gallagher adopts a similar distinction between ‘counterfactual histories’ and ‘alternate history novels’, respectively. Catherine Gallagher, ‘The Way It Wasn’t: The Uses of Counterfactual Pasts’, paper delivered at *The Politics of the Past: Second Jyväskylä Symposium on Political Thought and Conceptual History* (University of Jyväskylä, 8-9 June 2007) <<http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/PolCon/coepolcon/PolTCH/events/gallagher.pdf>> [accessed 6 August 2008].

<sup>157</sup> Ryan, 2006, p. 646.

soon becomes impossible to predict with any degree of accuracy what is likely to happen to balls F, G and H. [...] Of course, pure fiction is an altogether different area.<sup>158</sup>

Perhaps time span is more important as a discriminating criterion than is the sheer bulk of the text, which could, alternatively, debate the different possible outcomes of one battle at book length, or sketch an alternative history of the world in a few pages. Nor is the billiard metaphor altogether convincing: the table is smooth and has precise dimensions, the balls are all of the same material, diameter, and weight; in short, it is a much more safely predictable world than the real one. If God does not play dice — in Einstein's famous phrase<sup>159</sup> — History does not play chess either. There is no finite, mathematically defined set of choices; more important still, there are no cogent rules of the game.

It is the use of tenses that helps identifying, more clearly and decisively than any other feature, the divergent ontological attitudes of HC and AF. Although occasionally written in the present tense, fiction consistently adopts an organization of tenses that serve as textual markers, orienting the readers' interpretation and instructing them to identify the genre to which the text belongs, in much the same manner as functions the 'once upon a time' traditionally prefixed to fairy tales; what matters is not so much temporality in referential terms — what is narrated could indifferently have happened a minute, or a thousand years before, or not at all — as the general discursive attitude, establishing the authority of the narrative voice possessing knowledge of the whole narrative as actual and complete, rather than hypothetical and merely sequential.<sup>160</sup> Thus, the tenses may vary, but the mode is always the indicative. On the contrary, HC

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<sup>158</sup> Andrew Roberts, ed., *What Might Have Been: Leading Historians on Twelve 'What Ifs' of History* (London: Phoenix, 2005; first published 2004), p. 8.

<sup>159</sup> In a letter to the physicist Max Born, Einstein wrote: 'You believe in the God who plays dice, and I in complete law and order in a world which objectively exists, and which I, in a wildly speculative way, am trying to capture. I firmly *believe*, but I hope that someone will discover a more realistic way, or rather a more tangible basis than it has been my lot to do. Even the great initial success of the quantum theory does not make me believe in the fundamental dice-game, although I am well aware that your younger colleagues interpret this as a consequence of senility.' Ian Stewart, *Does God Play Dice? The New Mathematics of Chaos* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002; first published 1989), p. 329.

<sup>160</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, III, 275-276. See also Harald Weinrich, *Tempus: Besprochene und erzählte Welt* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1964).

prevalently adopt conditional tenses, expressing the general proposition: if X had taken place, then Y would/might have followed. Therefore, the question ‘Why don’t we call counterfactual histories “fictions”?’ is beside the point, and the ‘tendency to put counterfactual narrative history in the “history” category’ is not so much ‘symptomatic of a contemporary fiction-tolerance in the discipline of history’<sup>161</sup> — which has been there all along, in the emplotment of historiographic narratives<sup>162</sup> — as the consequence of the correct identification of two clearly distinct discursive modes. HC are not very ‘narrative’ to begin with — and even when they are, only limitedly and awkwardly so. One example will suffice to illustrate the point.

In a counterfactual speculation on the untimely death of Alexander at the Battle of the Granicus River, before he could even become ‘the Great’, some remarkable shifts of tenses take place.<sup>163</sup> First, the editor anticipates that in such an event ‘the conquests of the young Macedonian king *would never have been realized*, the Persian Empire *would have survived* unchallenged, and the brilliant Hellenistic period [...] *would have been* stillborn’.<sup>164</sup> Thus, the premature death of Alexander is presented as hypothetical. The essay proper, however, begins with a narrative account of the battle, in which the prevailing mode is the indicative, and the hypotheses formulated concern possibilities still open to realization: ‘The enemy *was* massed in a defensive formation [...]. A serious setback early in the campaign *could end* the invasion before it had properly begun. [...] The king *led* his Macedonian shock cavalry in an audacious charge. [...] Young Alexander *was* surrounded by enemies. [...] A second strike *would certainly kill* him. And with [him] *would die* the hopes of the entire expedition [...]. In the next few

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<sup>161</sup> Gallagher.

<sup>162</sup> ‘History [and] literature [...] make natural companions. [...] The historical record is always incomplete such that historians must try to conjecture what a historical event or period was like, filling in details by means of their own (controlled) imagination — not unlike novelists.’ Brian Fay, ‘Introduction: Unconventional History’, *History and Theory*, 41.4 (December 2002), 1-6 (p. 2).

<sup>163</sup> Josiah Ober, ‘Conquest Denied: The Premature Death of Alexander the Great’, in Robert Cowley, ed., *What If? Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2001; first published 1999), pp. 37-56. Emphasis added.

<sup>164</sup> Cowley, pp. 37-38.

seconds [...] the entire course of Western history *would be decided*.<sup>165</sup> There follows another narrative section, set off typographically by three diamonds preceded and followed by a blank line, devoted to a summary of Alexander's actual life — before and after the Battle of the Granicus — and of the ensuing Hellenistic period. The section is concluded by the reminder that 'modern Western culture [...] is a product of the world that grew up in the wake of Alexander's conquest'.<sup>166</sup> After short consideration given to an opposite counterfactual scenario by historian Arnold Toynbee, imagining what would have happened if Alexander had lived to become an old man,<sup>167</sup> readers are shown how 'history *would have been* different indeed' if Alexander had died at the Granicus. The ensuing section begins with the narrative account of Alexander's death as actual, rather than hypothetical: 'With the second blow of the ax, Alexander's skull *was cleaved*; he *died* instantly.' Then, 'Macedon *devolved* into civil war', whereas 'Persia [...] *entered* a long period of relative peace and prosperity'.<sup>168</sup> However, the account, culminating with the integration between the Roman and Persian cultures, is not pursued through the entire section, as the hypothetical mode is resumed in the last two paragraphs (and maintained for the rest of the essay): 'This is the world as we *might have known* it.'<sup>169</sup> Such a warning, conspicuously recalling readers to the reality of established facts, is a good example of the 'unself-consciously rhetorical' attitude of many a modern historian.<sup>170</sup> Rather than of the smug understatement of Magritte's 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (1928-1929), it reminds one of the concern shown by the 'rude mechanicals' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that their show might be overtly realistic:

BOTTOM Masters, you ought to consider with yourselves: to bring in—God shield us!—a lion among ladies, is a most dreadful thing; for there is not a more fearful wild-fowl than your lion living; and we ought to look to 't.

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<sup>165</sup> Cowley, pp. 39-40.

<sup>166</sup> Cowley, p. 45.

<sup>167</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, 'If Alexander the Great had Lived On', in *Some Problems of Greek History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 441-486.

<sup>168</sup> Cowley, p. 49.

<sup>169</sup> Cowley, p. 54.

<sup>170</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 114.

SNOUT Therefore another prologue must tell he is not a lion.  
 BOTTOM Nay, you must name his name, and half his face must  
 be seen through the lion's neck: and he himself  
 must speak through, saying thus, or to the same  
 defect,—‘Ladies,’—or ‘Fair-ladies—I would wish  
 You,’—or ‘I would request you,’—or ‘I would  
 entreat you,—not to fear, not to tremble: my life  
 for yours. If you think I come hither as a lion, it  
 were pity of my life: no I am no such thing; I am a  
 man as other men are;’ and there indeed let him name  
 his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner.  
 (*MND*, III. 1. TLN 845-860)

In a similar fashion, the tenses in the Alexander counterfactual are unstable, alternatively showing and concealing the real course of events behind the speculation, the bare face behind the lion's mask: ‘Under this international regime [...] *there was* no hegemonic “master culture” or “central canon”. [...] This means that *there would have been* no Renaissance, no Enlightenment, no “modernity”.’<sup>171</sup>

Significantly, the contributions to the first collection of HC to have reached definite renown, Squire's *If It Had Happened Otherwise*, are more literary in style and ironic in tone than their later counterparts, as the authors are diverse — ‘a motley crew, mainly composed of novelists and journalists’<sup>172</sup> — and include, among others, G. K. Chesterton, André Maurois, and Winston Churchill. Their purpose was certainly not that of testing scientific hypotheses about the past; rather, they pursued each his own personal agenda and went about writing a witty *divertissement*, or making a political point with present relevance:

If nothing else, Squire's volume firmly established the character of the counterfactual essay as a *jeu d'esprit*, a vehicle for wishful thinking or reductive explanation — and, above all, high table humour.<sup>173</sup>

With hindsight, Ferguson wonders: ‘Did Squire's book discredit the notion of counterfactual history for a generation?’<sup>174</sup> Yet he may have been too severe, given the heterogeneous background of the contributors, and misunderstood Squire's tone in the Introduction as ‘self-deprecating’, whereas it appears to have been that of a facetious

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<sup>171</sup> Cowley, p. 54.

<sup>172</sup> Ferguson, p. 9.

<sup>173</sup> Ferguson, p. 14.

<sup>174</sup> Ferguson, p. 10.

*captatio benevolentiae*.<sup>175</sup> Nor was the conclusion as ‘lame’ as Ferguson would have it: the statement ‘it doesn’t help much, as nobody is to know’ does not refer to counterfactual history as such, but, rather, to the knowledge about the decisiveness of past events, which can no longer help those who lived through them to make the right decisions. The full paragraph reads:

Perusal of all these papers makes one realise how momentous are the decisions that are being taken at this moment. Somebody in Tibet may have a bad night’s sleep, or sleep too long, and the fates of nations will be involved. However, it doesn’t help much, as nobody is to know whether it would be better for the world for him to oversleep himself or to suffer from insomnia.<sup>176</sup>

Commonsensibly enough, nobody can see into the future, but everybody might learn from past mistakes. Even Ferguson reluctantly concedes the potential historical importance of apparently trifling events, although he warns that ‘this may sometimes have been the case; but it has to be demonstrated rather than simply assumed, or the explanations are simply not plausible’.<sup>177</sup> But he fails to acknowledge how, in that very introduction, Squire anticipates to some extent the *Chaosstory* that Ferguson will advocate some decades — and much historical theory — later:

There is no action or event, great or small (leaving predestination out of account) which might not have happened differently, and, happening differently, have perhaps modified the world’s history for all time. Carlyle said that an Indian on the shores of Lake Ontario could not throw a pebble a few yards without altering the globe’s centre of gravity. By the same token, if the Indian refrains from throwing pebbles and occupies a second or an hour in some other manner—such as composing a war song which may later infuriate a tribe to victory, or killing a settler whose vote, were he not killed, would turn an election, or wooing the maiden whom he just lost—it is evident that his course of action may send ripples of event all over the world for ever.<sup>178</sup>

Which is anything but a dismissal of counterfactual history, and poses a question — namely, how is one to know which events can be of historical consequence and which cannot — that Ferguson too hastily dismisses:

Now, while there is no logical reason why trivial things should *not* have momentous consequences, it is important to beware of the reductive inference that therefore a trivial thing is *the* cause of a great event.<sup>179</sup>

True enough. But there are two possible objections:

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<sup>175</sup> Ferguson, p. 9.

<sup>176</sup> Squire, p. vi.

<sup>177</sup> Ferguson, p. 13.

<sup>178</sup> Squire, p. v.

<sup>179</sup> Ferguson, p. 12.

- 1) The ‘trivial thing’ could be a necessary but not sufficient cause of the event in question, which is rather the rule than the exception with historical events. Each historical event, however typical, is unique, so that it would be absurd to derive a causative law that establishes: whenever the nose of an Egyptian queen wooed by two Roman generals competing for empire is longer than  $x$  inches,  $y$  happens; however, if the nose is shorter, then  $z$  happens.
- 2) It is hardly possible — if at all — to ‘demonstrate’, as Ferguson demands, that what did *not* happen would or would not have been the cause of an event. The ‘theory of Cleopatra’s nose’ may not be a ‘reductive explanation’, after all; rather than being ‘more plausible’, the alternative explanation ‘had Anthony not delayed leaving Egypt, he might have defeated Caesar’ might just remove one link in the causal chain and show the snowball when it has had time enough to grow closer to avalanche size.<sup>180</sup>

At any rate, the approach in Ferguson’s ground-breaking collection of *HC Virtual History* is much more rigorous than was Squire’s, especially in the identification of potential turning points, which is hardly left to speculation; rather, it is based on the scrupulous examination of documentary evidence for governmental policy on key issues, and of the alternative course that could have been chosen at the time of crucial decisions. Not incidentally, therefore, the collection examines possible alternative historical paths for the last few centuries — starting from Stuart England — which ensures that a wealth of documents is available for scrutiny. Much more arduous would have been the task of reconstructing the corresponding decision-making process in societies that did not keep written records.

The goal of maintaining a tight and sound argumentative structure clearly informs the deft counterhistorical reconstruction by the editor in the Afterword to the collection, which sweeps across three-and-a-half centuries and is based on the

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<sup>180</sup> Ferguson, pp. 12-13.

counterfactual premise of a Stuart victory in the Scottish campaign of 1639, already examined in one of the preceding essays.<sup>181</sup> In fact, all the successive events described are based on the hypotheses which were previously examined, but are now taken as actual history, thus reversing the perspective between our continuum and the one that would have been initiated by the actualization of a series of alternatives. Similarly, in the Preface to *Unmaking the West* the editors reject as pointless speculations some turning points in history leading to Western dominance, by adopting the counterfactual stance of a panel of historians setting out to write a collection of HC in a world dominated by imperial China.<sup>182</sup>

Besides having being exploited in the illustrious antecedent of Churchill's 'If Lee Had Not Won the Battle of Gettysburg',<sup>183</sup> this ontological strategy is the same as that adopted in AF, which confers actuality to a world different from the one we know. Indeed, the meta-historical — or, rather, meta-allohistorical<sup>184</sup> — allusion has been a common strategy with alternate histories since the beginnings of the subgenre, adopted not only by Geoffroy-Château but also by that other forefather of French AH Charles Renouvier, as the Preface to his *Uchronie* explains:

Arrivé au terme, [...] supposant alors que certains personnages eussent pris d'autres résolutions qu'ils n'ont fait il y a quinze cent ans, et ces résolutions-là sont celles qu'ils ont véritablement prises, il [the narrator] montre en peu de mots les conséquences de leur actes, il fait pressentir toute la suite des calamités possibles, interminables, qui en seraient sorties ; et ces calamités sont celles qu'ont éprouvées nos pères et qui pèsent sur nous encore.<sup>185</sup>

The strategy of holding a mirror up to the nature of allohistorical hypotheses is relegated to the margins or brief asides in the early AF specimens mentioned, whereas it

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<sup>181</sup> Ferguson, pp. 416-440.

<sup>182</sup> Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, and Geoffrey Parker, eds, *Unmaking the West: 'What-If' Scenarios that Rewrite World History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 1-3.

<sup>183</sup> In Squire, pp. 175-196.

<sup>184</sup> The label 'double counterfactual' — i.e., 'imaginary people in an imaginary world envisioning an alternative world that bears a mischievous resemblance to our own' — has also been proposed for such texts: see Tetlock, p. 3.

<sup>185</sup> Charles Renouvier, *Uchronie, (l'utopie dans l'histoire), esquisse historique apocryphe du développement de la civilisation européenne, tel qu'il n'a pas été, tel qu'il aurait pu être* (Paris: Fayard, 1988; first published 1876), p. 10.

determines the attitude of the whole text in the HC examples. In both, however, the attitude is at the same time didactic and ironic: ‘The primary value of such an exercise [...] is humility. The world we inhabit is but one of a vast array of worlds that might have been brought about.’ Moreover, we can correct the ‘hindsight bias’ that makes us forget, ‘once we know what has happened, [...] how unsure we used to be about the future,’<sup>186</sup> and lets us indulge in a ‘creeping determinism’<sup>187</sup> of sorts. The irony, however, can be understood as such only on the basis of the knowledge — and from the viewpoint — of the course of actual history, which the texts apparently belie. This confirms the difficulties in analyzing texts with a high rhetorical content by reducing them to sets of propositions ostensibly containing as many literal statements, as philosophers will do. It is also evidence that the emplotment of historiographic texts in the ironic mode, so widespread in the crisis of historical thought that followed its heyday in the nineteenth century, has not lost its appeal in general, and it is particularly favoured in a kind of historical discourse (AH) which, being contrasted with official historiography, is ironic by definition.<sup>188</sup> As Churchill explained:

Once a great victory is won it dominates not only the future but the past. All the chains of consequence clink out as if they never could stop. The hopes that were shattered, the passions that were quelled, the sacrifices that were ineffectual are all swept out of the land of reality. Still [...] it always amuses historians and philosophers to pick out the tiny things, the sharp agate points, on which the ponderous balance of destiny turns.<sup>189</sup>

The similarities between HC and AF are as striking and as important as the differences. Ferguson’s discursive strategy replicates the argumentative speculations typical of all the essays in the collections, considering as plausible those alternative policies which had been actually pondered — and, in this alternative ontology, rejected — by the leaders of the time. But the *fil rouge* provided by the examination of how a different fate for the British monarchy would, in turn, have affected trans-Atlantic relationships and, ultimately, the balance of power in Europe and the world at large is

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<sup>186</sup> Tetlock, p. 3.

<sup>187</sup> Tetlock, p. 26.

<sup>188</sup> See the conclusion of the Preface to White, *Metahistory*, pp. ix-xii.

<sup>189</sup> Squire, 175.

evidently deemed too thin and subject to excessive stretch over the centuries. In order to provide readers with a sense of continuity and familiarity, key historical figures and events are thus preserved — as is often the case with AF — more often than not with a shift or reversal of roles, carrying ironic undertones. For example, a Joseph Djugashvili still plays a paramount role in Russian history, first as a priest — following his youthful real-history inclinations — then as Patriarch, and eventually as self-crowned Tsar.<sup>190</sup> On the other hand, Dewey is the American President at the time of the Korea Crisis, but he chooses for intervention on the side of the rebel North against the Japanese South.<sup>191</sup>

As a general rule of thumb it can be held that the longer the distance from the alteration, the less easily the alternate world it originated can be interpreted in terms of actual history, as the effects of the original alteration will have snowballed so as to produce quite unpredictable results. Nevertheless, quite often Ryan's Principle of Minimal Departure of fiction and counterfactuals from the real world finds a surreptitious application in the introduction of anachronistic, tongue-in-cheek references to actual history, which will trigger recognition from the readers, both letting them enjoy the citational play of the text and helping them to make sense of a widely divergent version of the world as they know it: this is what Henriët defines 'le clin d'œil au lecteur', a recurrent feature of AH from the early examples of the genre — such as Louis Geoffroy's *Napoléon et la conquête du monde* (1836) — to this day.<sup>192</sup>

In terms of subject matters, writers of AF tend to choose popular turning points in history, with a definite preference for those that their readers are more likely to have some knowledge about, even if their historical culture should be lacking: that is why among the favourite subjects are World War II and the American Civil War. By contrast, writers of HC will target a more specialized readership and devote their speculations even to those periods and episodes in history of whose relevance the general public will scarcely be aware. Examples thereof are, in Cowley's collection, the essay by McNeill

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<sup>190</sup> Ferguson, pp. 434-437.

<sup>191</sup> Ferguson, p. 438.

<sup>192</sup> Henriët, pp. 33-35. See also Ryan, 1980, p. 406.

on an ancient alternative to Jewish history, and that by Porter on an early demise of the Lydian empire.<sup>193</sup>

There is a definite difference in terms of speech acts, as HC and AF tend to be read and interpreted according to different sets of expectations, which in turn influence their production. But what is clearly distinctive is the adoption, by professional historians, of stricter constraints in terms of possibility, as they confine themselves to those alternatives which could have obtained, given the same initial conditions that produced actual history:

The first rule for What If history-writing should be to keep it as believable as possible. We can untune one string, but not the whole violin. [...] The difference between a What If and mere science fiction is that it is impermissible for Lenin, say, to have a nuclear bomb, or for Cromwell to be able to deploy the Brown Bess rifle.<sup>194</sup>

In the collection of historical counterfactuals *What If?*, ‘plausible [...] is the key word’ legitimating counterfactual analysis as sound — and distinguishing it from more or less fantastic ‘speculations such as what would have happened if Hannibal had possessed an H-bomb or Napoleon, stealth bombers’.<sup>195</sup> At most, such improbabilities can provide amusement — and good selling figures — to the ‘armchair historian’, for example Harry Turtledove, whose *The Guns of the South*, in which Lee’s Confederates are supplied with submachine guns by time-travelling South Africans, sold 350,000 copies over a dozen years.<sup>196</sup>

According to the ‘minimal rewrite rule’, the alteration should be as small as possible — but decisive all the same — for the hypothesis to be plausible.<sup>197</sup> But this risks to imply that history is subject to whimsical twists and turns — a fate perhaps

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<sup>193</sup> William H. McNeill, ‘Infectious Alternatives: The Plague That Saved Jerusalem, 701 B.C.’, in Cowley, pp. 1-12. Barbara N. Porter, ‘A Good Night’s Sleep Can Do Wonders’, in Cowley, pp. 13-14.

<sup>194</sup> Andrew Roberts, *What Might Have Been*, p. 9.

<sup>195</sup> Cowley, p. xiii.

<sup>196</sup> Gregory Feeley, ‘The Way It Wasn’t: How What-If History Grew from a Minor Literary Curiosity to a Bestselling Genre of Popular Fiction’, *Weekly Standard*, 6 September 2004 <<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Protected/Articles/000/000/004/523imbvr.asp>> [accessed 1 October 2006]. See also Harry Turtledove, *The Guns of the South: A Novel of the Civil War* (New York: Ballantine, 1992).

<sup>197</sup> Tetlock, pp. 9-10.

worse than determinism. The possibility constraints for writing acceptable HC, whether they are defined as ‘plausibility’ or ‘minimal-rewrite rule’, usually boil down to little more than common sense prescriptions against blatant anachronism such as would produce ‘miracle counterfactuals’.<sup>198</sup> ‘We cannot equip the Persian vessels at Salamis with torpedoes’ sounds sensible enough; surely similar criteria will be subscribed by any self-respecting writer of historical fiction who wants to attain some verisimilitude, while not aspiring to scientific status.<sup>199</sup>

In AF possibility constraints tend to be more relaxed, and certainly not prescriptive: they can be respected, and perhaps they should, if the narrative is to retain the credibility that readers tend to expect even from a form of written entertainment. Such is, at any rate, the dominant tone in the comments/reviews — published on the Amazon website — of an alternative history of the Civil War, Robert Conroy’s *1862*, animatedly discussing the forces on the field, their respective strength and armament, and pointing the finger at the supposed discrepancies:

At one point early in the book, *HMS Gorgon* defeats *USS St. Lawrence* in a battle. *Gorgon* is described as a ‘steam frigate’ mounting 74 guns. Sorry, Conroy, but a 74 gun ship was a battleship, not a frigate.

Actual numbers of troops involved: In the book *1862*, there are about 20,000 British regulars in Canada and an equal number of Canadian Militiamen: In Real life, there was, before the Trent affair, 11,000 British regulars in Canada and 50,000 Canadian militiamen; There were 39,000 troops in Britain ready to be sent there, and transport enough to bring them all there well before the campaign season began; the Canadian militia was increased to 100,000 men and the authorities had to turn away volunteers!

The bottom really falls out of the credibility barrel as Conroy takes us from one British military disaster to the next. [...] As for the blockade of Northern ports by the British, Conroy nullifies that early on in the conflict, with the advent of numerous sea-going iron clads that, historically, were still largely experimental and, as the *Monitor*’s later sinking in bad weather showed, very unreliable.

Although the invasion of Canada was clearly a distinct possibility in the event of war with Britain, [...] historically, the Lincoln Administration was ridden with fears of a Confederate attack on Washington D.C. Lincoln, in fact, held back over 50,000 troops from McClellan during his Peninsular Campaign and thus helped to contribute to the defeat of that general and the extension of the civil war itself. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that that same government, now faced with a foreign foe as well as a domestic one, would have now felt more free to give thousands of troops to an untried and unproven general who was still seen as a drunk. [...] In the world of alternative history, unlike the world of extreme science fiction or fantasy, the credibility of the causal relationships the story is built upon, is even more important than the conclusions they lead to.

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<sup>198</sup> Tetlock, p. 34.

<sup>199</sup> Tetlock, p. 368.

In our world it took Lincoln and the Union 4 years of terrible war and TOTAL MOBILIZATION to defeat the CSA. That is a fact. Now Conroy has a Novel where the Union beats the Brits, Canada, and the CSA in one year. [...] Was it possible for the Union to win such a war? Not at all likely but yes possible. Was it possible for the North to win such a war in one year. Hell No !!! Wait.. just maybe.. if Lee was smoking crack.<sup>200</sup>

As with the definition of fictionality, the HC/AF distinction might have to be defined pragmatically according to generic conventions, or even on a case-by-case base; it would be difficult to ground the classification on any immanent features of the texts, since there will always be exceptions; although no serious historians would risk their career by presenting fantastic hypotheses based on utterly impossible alternatives, the reverse is not necessarily true to either authorial practice or readers' expectations. But possibility constraints can be — and sometimes are — discarded in AF, or the alternative history realized by means that do not exist now, nor will in the predictable future, such as time machines.

Whether a historical narrative is counterfactual or not — indeed, especially when it is counterfactual — severe constraints are operative for key historical figures, if a high degree of verisimilitude is to be achieved:

Characters in What Ifs must act according to their true personalities. There is little point in trying to posit an alternative past in which Hitler gets the atomic bomb because of his decency to his German Jewish scientists, [...] because if he were pro-Semitic he wouldn't be Hitler, and therefore he probably wouldn't need a bomb in the first place.<sup>201</sup>

By contrast, much more freedom is allowed in the definition of characters representing common people, whose diversity is so rich as to open up huge possibilities to the imagination of the narrator, provided that there be no macroscopic anachronism. The same freedom is allowed for their individual behaviour and choices, as they are unlikely to influence the course of history, according to Carlyle's 'Great Man' theory, which holds that exceptional personalities play a much greater role in shaping history than do

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<sup>200</sup> Giampaolo Spedo, '1862: A Not-So-Alternate History of the Civil War', in Mario Melchionda and Monica Santini, *Carte d'occasione*, 3 (Padova: Unipress, 2007), pp. 285-323 (p. 317). See also 'Reviews for 1862: A Novel', <<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/0345482379/104-5970667-1576703>> [accessed 13 November 2006].

<sup>201</sup> Andrew Roberts, *What Might Have Been*, p. 13.

social forces.<sup>202</sup> The theory may well be ‘déclassé within academic circles, [but] still sells well [...] because it helps readers relate to the past’.<sup>203</sup> However, it is also a double-edged weapon, as it might constitute an effective retort to the anti-deterministic argument that history is shaped by the sum total of innumerable, unpredictable individual destinies, to which counterfactual scenarios ceaselessly apply:

We only have to look at our own lives to appreciate how the alteration of one small thing on one particular day can sometimes have a huge effect on everything else, perhaps for years, perhaps for life. And if it is true for individuals, why should it not also hold true for history, which is but the story of the lives of millions of individuals?<sup>204</sup>

Because — one might retort by combining Carlyle with Orwell — although all humans are historical, some humans are more historical than others: history is not something that happens to them but, rather, something they make happen. On the other hand, social institutions are obviously *not* the mere sum total of the individuals composing them; otherwise, there would be no point or competitive advantage in establishing and preserving them, and historiography itself would be reduced to the sum total of individual biographies — a conclusion no historian would be eager to draw.

However, if history is shaped by exceptional individuals — rather than by the *vast impersonal forces*<sup>205</sup> behind the inexorable progress of humanity towards a predetermined goal — then crucial events depend on the fortunes of such individuals, by definition as subject to sudden reversals as those of all humans. Such is the problem

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<sup>202</sup> See Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (Kent, OH; London: Kent State University Press, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>203</sup> Robert L. Bateman, ‘Review of Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000*’, *Parameters*, 36.1 (Spring 2006), 143-145 (p. 144).

<sup>204</sup> Andrew Roberts, *What Might Have Been*, p. 1. Ferguson had presented much the same argument at the outset of his Introduction, probably with much the same purpose of ingratiating a readership beyond that of canonical historiography, and convincing them of the soundness of the counterfactual enterprise by adopting a colloquial tone, in a work that is otherwise scientifically rigorous and thoroughly researched: ‘The obvious objection to such hypothetical or “counterfactual” questions is simple: why bother asking them? Why concern ourselves with what *didn’t* happen? [...] One easy response [...] is that we constantly ask such “counterfactual” questions in our daily lives. [...] We picture ourselves avoiding past blunders, or committing blunders we narrowly avoided. [...] Of course, we know perfectly well that we cannot travel back in time and do these things differently. But the business of imagining such counterfactuals is a vital part of the way in which we learn.’ Ferguson, p. 2.

<sup>205</sup> In T. S. Eliot’s phrase. See: ‘Notes towards the Definition of Culture’, in *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harvest, 1940), pp. 79-186 (p. 163).

analyzed by many counterfactual exercises, including the earliest known example, Livy's Alexander digression, which not only fits neatly 'into what we can suppose to have been a strong tradition of counterfactual speculation both in public oratory and in historiography' but 'concerns itself with a central historical/historiographical question: the place of *unus homo* both in *res publica* and in *res gestae*'.<sup>206</sup>

The fact that the acknowledged beginnings of fictional AH saw a focus on the figure of Napoleon is significant with regard to the theoretical approach to history espoused — whether consciously or unconsciously — by most practitioners of the subgenre, and has consequences for the structure and characteristics of the fictional worlds. Napoleon, together with Cromwell, was the paragon of 'the Hero as King' for Carlyle:

The Commander over Men; he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender themselves, and find their welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the most important of Great Men. He is practically the summary for us of *all* the various figures of Heroism; Priest, Teacher, whatsoever of earthly or of spiritual dignity we can fancy to reside in a man, embodies itself here, to *command* over us, to furnish us with constant practical teaching, to tell us for the day and hour what we are to *do*.<sup>207</sup>

The last century saw a renewed interest in the concept of the hero and leadership at large, whose potentialities were dramatically increased — sometimes with totalitarian results — by the powerful machinery of modern propaganda:

A Caesar, a Cromwell, a Napoleon could and did issue decrees in many fields. But [...] they could not exact universal obedience to their decrees, or even suppress criticism. Some avenues of escape could never be closed. [...] Today [...] a Hitler, a Stalin, a Mussolini not only can and do issue decrees in every field, from military organization to abstract art and music; such dictators enforce them one hundred per cent. [...] They cannot, of course, command geniuses to rise in the fields they control but they can utterly destroy all nonconforming genius and talent. Through schools on every level, since literacy is a weapon; through the radio, which no one can escape if it is loud enough; through the press and cinema, to which men naturally turn for information and relaxation—they carry their education to the very 'subconscious' of their people.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Ruth Morello, 'Livy's Alexander Digression (9.17-19): Counterfactuals and Apologetics', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 92 (2002), 62-85 (p. 65).

<sup>207</sup> Thomas Carlyle, 'Lecture VI [May 22, 1840]: The Hero As King. Cromwell, Napoleon: Modern Revolutionism', in *Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship* (London: Dent, 1967), pp. 422-467 (p. 422).

<sup>208</sup> Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (New York: Humanities Press, 1950; first published 1943), pp. 5-6.

First published in 1943, Hook's book is undoubtedly a period piece, imbued as it is with the concerns of 'the struggle for survival against totalitarian aggression'.<sup>209</sup> Yet it also strikes a prophetic key, anticipatory of today's expansion of a celebrity culture — and cult — well into the precincts of the political arena, when he observes that, not only in totalitarian but even in democratic countries,

everyone has a practical stake of the most concrete kind in whatever leadership exists. [...] For once, at least, Mr Everyman's moral appraisal of those in high places—if only he can keep it above the plane of village gossip—has historical relevance and justification.<sup>210</sup>

But to transcend the level of 'village gossip' may be difficult, or even undesired by the powers that be: 'Today, more than ever before, *belief* in "the hero" is a synthetic product. Whoever controls the microphones and printing presses can make or unmake belief overnight.'<sup>211</sup>

Hook identifies the crucial dichotomy of historical causation, determinism vs antedeterminism:

Either the main line of historical action and social development is literally inescapable or it is not. If it is, any existing leadership is a completely subsidiary element in determining the main historical pattern of today and tomorrow. If it is not inescapable, the question almost asks itself: to what extent is the character of a given leadership causally and, since men are involved, morally responsible for our historical position and future?<sup>212</sup>

Rather than seeing two irreconcilable alternatives, however, he prefers to search for nuances and subtleties:

To deny the inescapability of the main line of historical action does not *necessarily* mean that what it *will* be always depends upon the character of the leadership. There are more things in history than 'laws of destiny' and 'great men'. As far as the historical role of leadership is concerned, it is a question of degree and types of situation.<sup>213</sup>

It might also be that the need to attribute the responsibility for historical change — whether positive or negative — to the intervention of supernatural but personified agents is so ingrained in the human mind that, after having dispensed with the capricious gods

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<sup>209</sup> Hook, p. 6.

<sup>210</sup> Hook, p. 7.

<sup>211</sup> Hook, p. 10.

<sup>212</sup> Hook, p. 7.

<sup>213</sup> Hook, pp. 7-8.

of earlier cosmogonies, humans still recur to allegorical personifications as props for their own hopes or anxieties:

To ascend from the individual to social institutions and relations between individuals is to go from the picturesque and concrete to an abstraction. Without adequate training the transition is not always easy. This undoubtedly accounts for the tendency of many people to personify ‘social forces’, ‘economic laws’, and ‘styles of culture’. These abstractions compel and decree and rule, face and conquer obstacles almost like the heroes of old. Behind the metaphor in much orthodox Marxist writing one can almost see ‘the forces of production’ straining at the shackles with which Capital and Profit have fettered them while human beings, when they are not tugging on one side or another, watch with bated breath for the outcome.<sup>214</sup>

Severe as he is with Carlyle — ‘Literally construed, Carlyle’s notions of historical causation are clearly false, and where not false, opaque and mystical’ — Hook is also dismissive of the opposite view: ‘The Spencerians, the Hegelians, and the Marxists of every political persuasion [...] substituted another doctrine which was just as extravagant although stated in language more prosaic and dull.’ One possible solution could be the application of Darwin’s key concept of *variation* to the problem:

According to this view, the great men were thrown up by ‘chance’ in the processes of natural variation while the social environment served as a selective agency in providing them with the opportunities to get their work done.<sup>215</sup>

Suggestively, the neatly predictable course of galactic history in Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy, predicated on the deterministic doctrine of *psychohistory*, is disrupted by one such unforeseen variation, the advent of the enigmatic Mule with his extraordinary psychic powers.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Hook, pp. 8-9.

<sup>215</sup> Hook, pp. 14-15.

<sup>216</sup> Isaac Asimov, *The Foundation Trilogy: Three Classics of Science Fiction* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982; first published 1951-1953). On the other hand, Asimov is also said to have written ‘the ultimate chaotic narrative in which the replacement of a single letter in the forename of a scientist prevents nuclear war’ (Tucker, p. 272). See also Isaac Asimov, ‘Spell My Name with an S’, in *The Complete Short Stories* (London, 1994; first published 1958), I, 397-414.

In spite of Hook's eclecticism, the Great Man theory is generally opposed to — rather than reconciled with — deterministic historical doctrines.<sup>217</sup> Nevertheless, their theorizations are often at variance with historical reality:

Social determinists of all hues cannot write history without recognizing that at least some individuals, at some critical moments, play a decisive role in redirecting the historical wave. Engels speaks of Marx, Trotsky of Lenin, Russian officialdom of Stalin in a manner completely at variance with their professed ideology. Even theological determinists like the Popes, who believe we can trace the finger of God in all historical events, speak of western culture since the Reformation as if it had been created by Luther and Calvin behind God's back.<sup>218</sup>

Marxist doctrine takes on a providential tone, apparently ruling out the possibility of an alternative to History as the enfolding of Necessity, in the strict determinism professed by Engels:

That such and such a man and precisely that man arises at that particular time in that given country is of course pure accident. But cut him out and there will be a demand for a substitute, and this substitute will be found, good or bad, but in the long run he will be found. That Napoleon, just that particular Corsican, should have been the military dictator whom the French Republic, exhausted by its own war, had rendered necessary, was an accident; but that, if a Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled the place, is proved by the fact that the man has always been found as soon as he became necessary: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc.<sup>219</sup>

A stance strikingly similar to the strict determinism adopted by Engels can be found in Poul Anderson's *Time Patrol* story 'Brave to Be a King', in which the protagonist's friend and colleague Denison is stranded in ancient Persia and acts as King Cyrus:

The exact identity of the King doesn't matter. Another Cyrus would have acted differently from me in a million day-to-day details. Naturally. But if he wasn't a hopeless moron or maniac, if he was a reasonably able and decent person [...] then his career would have been the same as mine in all the important ways, the ways that got into the history books.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> For an attempt to reconcile the logical notions of 'contingency' and 'necessity' with the kind of causation found in history and recast 'the controversy between historicists and anti-historicists in less dogmatic language' by understanding historical necessity and contingency in terms of degrees of sensitivity to initial conditions, see Yemima Ben-Menahem, 'Historical Contingency', *Ratio (new series)*, 10.2 (September 1997), 99-107 (p. 99).

<sup>218</sup> Hook, pp. 12-13.

<sup>219</sup> Friedrich Engels, 'Engels to Borgius', London, 25 January 1894, in *Marx and Engels Correspondence*, trans. by Donna Torr (N.P.: International, 1968) <[http://marx.org/archive/marx/works/1894/letters/94\\_01\\_25.htm](http://marx.org/archive/marx/works/1894/letters/94_01_25.htm)> [accessed 8 February 2007].

<sup>220</sup> Poul Anderson, 'Brave to Be a King' (first published 1959), in *Time Patrol* (Riverdale, NY: Baen, 2006; first published 1991), pp. 55-112 (p.90). In the series, time travel is used to normalize history by removing all events that threaten to alter the desired course. To this purpose, a Time Patrol has been established by the now dominant race who evolved from man in the distant future, the Danellians. The stories report the exploits of the Patrol members — and particularly of one of them, Manse Everard — throughout history.

This is not altogether surprising, since *Time Patrol* has been termed ‘Anti-Alternate History’.<sup>221</sup>

Nor is it surprising that counterfactual historians be severely critical of both the Marxist and the Whig theories of history.<sup>222</sup> Roberts scoffs at the former:

It is pretty rich of the Marxists to denounce the concept of imaginary pasts when it is they who have for over a century and a half now been peddling the most ludicrous of all imaginary futures, one in which the state was somehow going to wither away globally.

But he is not much more lenient towards the latter:

The Whig version of history, in which mankind is inexorably moving towards a world of liberal democracy and the Brotherhood of Man, seems to me to be equally deeply flawed. If Germany [...] could [...] have taken two such sudden and savage steps backwards into barbarism, then surely history, rather than being on the right tracks towards human perfection, as Macaulay would have us believe, must actually be a locomotive capable of reversing, being shunted into sidings, or even smashing up in a ghastly crash.<sup>223</sup>

Thus, Auschwitz may have destroyed, together with faith in the existence of God, the belief in the purposeful and progressive nature of history.<sup>224</sup> Indeed, for some, the fight against the determinists is already a rearguard battle that risks leaving historiography lagging behind while other sciences advance at a brisk pace:

While we continue debating whether the past exhibits nonlinear properties and ask if history is chaotic, physicists, biologists, mathematicians, computer scientists, and economists have moved beyond chaos to antichaos, complexity, simplicity, complexification, simplicity, complicity, the collapse of chaos, and even the rise of post-chaos and post-complexity.<sup>225</sup>

Which, to the layperson ‘without adequate grounding in the [mathematical] language’ involved,<sup>226</sup> is curiously — if irreverently — reminiscent of the list of the genres practiced by the theatrical company visiting Elsinore, comprising:

[...] tragedy, comedy,  
history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral,  
tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral; scene  
indivisible, or poem unlimited.

(*Hamlet*, II. 2. TLN 1477-1480)

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<sup>221</sup> Hellekson, 2001, pp. 97-107.

<sup>222</sup> Roberts uses the term ‘Whig’ with current relevance.

<sup>223</sup> Andrew Roberts, *What Might Have Been*, p. 4.

<sup>224</sup> Ferdinando Camon, ‘Primo Levi, dire l’indicibile’, *Avvenire*, 1 April 2007.

<sup>225</sup> Shermer, p. 67.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibidem*.

The adoption of a more or less deterministic theory of history, either rejecting or admitting the possibility of alternative outcomes for the same events, also depends on the distinction between ‘une histoire événementielle et une histoire structural, [...] entre les personnages qui passent, et les forces à évolution lente, voire les formes stables de l’environnement géographique’, as in Fernand Braudel’s seminal *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (1949).<sup>227</sup>

At any rate, resistance to the adoption of counterfactuals in history is still fierce and influential, *pace* Tucker, who reassuringly maintains:

It is hardly necessary in this day and age to flog again the dead horse of *scientistic* linear theories of historiography, nor is it clear how counterfactuals can do a better job of refuting these theories than plain historical facts.<sup>228</sup>

The second statement may well be true but hardly comforting, as Tucker himself admits that teleologically oriented historians will hardly be deterred by patent contradictions between theory and reality, and merely postpone the fulfillment of their predictions indefinitely; thus, ‘any historical development can be incorporated into a loose teleological plan of history’.<sup>229</sup> Moreover, the horse of the metaphor may no longer be alive but still kicking hard — especially in academe.

A favourite polemical target for advocates of HC is ‘the chronicler of the Bolshevik regime’,<sup>230</sup> ‘the Marxist historian and apologist for Leninism E. H. Carr’, who scornfully dismissed counterfactual history as a ‘red herring’ and an ‘idle parlour-game’.<sup>231</sup> Another sceptic of the whole counterfactual historical enterprise is Richard Evans, who ‘forcefully restates two of Carr’s concerns: the power of this seductive genre

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<sup>227</sup> Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité*, p. 51.

<sup>228</sup> Tucker, p. 267.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>230</sup> Ferguson, p. 53.

<sup>231</sup> Andrew Roberts, ‘Introduction’ to *What Might Have Been*, p. 2. See also Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge January-March 1961*, ed. by R.W. Davies, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).

[counterfactual history] to trick us into treating imaginative guesswork as a form of reliable knowledge and the susceptibility of the genre to political agendas'.<sup>232</sup>

In fact, if 'la fonction symbolique de l'écriture historique permet à une société de se situer en se donnant un passé dans le langage',<sup>233</sup> this discursive past can also be rewritten, not only when new documents come to the light but also according to one's political-ideological outlook.<sup>234</sup> Indeed, AH is 'inherently presentist. It explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the present' by presenting either 'fantasy' or 'nightmare' scenarios<sup>235</sup> — a dichotomy corresponding to that between utopia and dystopia in alternative present scenarios. As is often the case with those who purport — or even sincerely believe — to be speaking about something or someone else when, in fact, they cannot but speak about themselves, *mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur*:

Ironically, alternate histories lend themselves very well to being studied as documents of memory for the same reason that historians have dismissed them as useless for the study of history — namely, their fundamental subjectivity. [...] Biases, fears and wishes, the desire to avoid guilt, the quest for vindication—these and other related sentiments all influence how alternate histories represent how the past might have been, just as they influence how people remember how it 'really' was.<sup>236</sup>

More often than not, the thesis behind the counterhistorical reconstruction is quite transparent in HC:

Even the better essays in *If ...* [i.e., Squire] are very obviously the products of their authors' contemporary political or religious preoccupations. As such, they tell us a good deal less about nineteenth-century alternatives than — for example — about 1930s views of the First World War. [...] In other words, rather than approaching past events with a conscious indifference to what is known about later events, each takes as his starting point the burning contemporary question:

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<sup>232</sup> Tetlock, p. 37 Note 4. See also Richard J. Evans, 'Telling It Like It Wasn't', *Historically Speaking*, 5.4 (March 2004) <<http://www.bu.edu/historic/hs/march04.htm>> [accessed 25 April 2008]

<sup>233</sup> François Dosse, 'Michel de Certeau et l'écriture de l'histoire', *Vingtième siècle*, 2.78 (2003), 145-156 < [http://www.cairn.info/article\\_p.php?ID\\_ARTICLE=VING\\_078\\_0145](http://www.cairn.info/article_p.php?ID_ARTICLE=VING_078_0145)> [accessed 16 July 2008] (para. 11 of 36).

<sup>234</sup> 'It could be argued that [...] academic histories, too, reflect historians' sense of the present as they attempt to depict what they think is significant about the past. In this way, allohistory and academic history may not be as different as one might think.' Fay, pp. 4-5.

<sup>235</sup> Gavriel David Rosenfeld, 'Why Do We Ask "What If?" Reflections on the Function of Alternate History', *History and Theory*, 41.4 (December 2002), 90-103 (p. 93).

<sup>236</sup> *Ibidem*.

How could the calamity of the First World War have been avoided? The result is, in essence, retrospective wishful thinking.<sup>237</sup>

Presentist concerns definitely inform Churchill's text, as he is clearly bent on the promotion of transatlantic brotherhood and the vindication of his own political trajectory, mirrored in the juxtaposed careers of Gladstone and Disraeli. In the alternative scenario following Lee's victory and emancipation of the Southern slaves, the former would have come 'back to his old friends, [...] "the stern and unbending Tories",' instead of drifting 'into radical and democratic courses', whereas the latter, who 'in his early days [...] was prejudiced in [the] eyes [of] the Tory aristocracy [...] as a Jew by race', would have found 'his natural place [...] with the left-out millions, with the dissenters, with the merchants of the North, with the voteless proletariat'. Indeed, 'if Lee had not won the Battle of Gettysburg, [...] he might well have ended his life in the House of Lords with the exclamation, "Power has come to me too late!"'.<sup>238</sup>

In *Virtual History*, however, Ferguson indulges in the same practices he stigmatizes in his predecessors, when he polemically concludes that the European Union of today is not substantially different from the one imagined by the Kaiser, since both are dominated by Germany:

It was — as the Kaiser rightly said — the British government which ultimately decided to turn the continental war into a world war, a conflict which lasted twice as long as and cost many more lives than Germany's first 'bid for European Union' would have, if it had only gone according to plan. By fighting Germany in 1914, Asquith, Grey and their colleagues helped ensure that, when Germany did finally achieve predominance on the continent, Britain was no longer strong enough to provide a check to it.<sup>239</sup>

In contrast — according to Ferguson's hypothesis, supported by contemporary documents — had Britain refrained from intervention, Germany would most probably have limited its goals considerably by excluding annexations from France and Belgium:

Would the limited war aims [...] have posed a direct threat to British interests? Did they imply a Napoleonic strategy? Hardly. All that the economic clauses [...] implied was the creation, some

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<sup>237</sup> Ferguson, p. 11.

<sup>238</sup> Squire, pp. 184-185. This is not the only reference by Churchill to actual political statements. For example, he also quotes Gladstone's famous speech supporting the South, delivered on 7 October 1862: Squire, p. 183.

<sup>239</sup> Niall Ferguson, 'The Kaiser's European Union: What If Britain Had "Stood Aside" in August 1914?', in Ferguson, pp. 228-280 (pp. 279-280).

eighty years early, of a German-dominated European customs union not so very different from the one which exists today.

Regrettably, ‘it was not to be: the bid for British neutrality was, as we know, rejected’.<sup>240</sup>

Tucker denounces as an ‘eccentric utopia’ such a vision, bemoaning ‘the loss of British world domination following the two World Wars, the ascendancy of the USA, and the economic dominance of Germany in Europe’ and preferring ‘a neutral but strong Britain ruling its Empire and forsaking Europe to the Prussians’.<sup>241</sup> He also takes up a middle position in the necessity vs contingency dispute:

History is composed of processes of varying levels of contingency and necessity. In other words, neither Marx nor Ferguson and Clark’s revisionism are absolutely right. The interesting question, though, is the extent and location of contingency and chaos in history. The only way to approach an answer to this question is empirically.<sup>242</sup>

More specifically, Ferguson’s ‘revisionism’ could also be criticized on the basis of another counterfactual in the collection — to which Ferguson also contributed — positing a German invasion of Britain in WWII and citing plans for European economic integration which eerily recall some policies adopted by the actual EU:

In 1942, Dr Walther Funk, the Reich Economics Minister and President of the Reichsbank, wrote the first chapter of a book entitled *Europäische Wirtschaftsgeellschaft* (European Economic Society) in which he called for a European single currency. Other chapters set out the Nazi blueprint for a common agricultural policy, an exchange rate mechanism, a single market and a central bank.<sup>243</sup>

Although the hindsight bias against any appeasement with Nazi atrocity would make it morally inconceivable now, a similar life-sparing argument might have been invoked as in Ferguson’s alternative WWI scenario, and with documentary evidence to support such a decision by the contemporary British leadership: the plan in itself does not sound more ominous than that envisaged by the Kaiser, as it does not mention the brutal exploitation of vanquished peoples and occupied territories that did follow in the wake of Nazi conquest; moreover, explicit offers to recognize British predominance over the seas had repeatedly been made by Hitler, and the division of the world between the respective

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<sup>240</sup> Ferguson, p. 260.

<sup>241</sup> Tucker, p. 275.

<sup>242</sup> Tucker, p. 276.

<sup>243</sup> Andrew Roberts and Niall Ferguson, ‘Hitler’s England: What If Germany Had Invaded Britain in May 1940?’, in Ferguson, pp. 281-320 (pp. 317-318).

spheres of influence of the British Empire and the Third Reich had already been envisioned in *Mein Kampf*. But surely it would take a much more hardened ‘revisionist’ than Ferguson to regret that such offers had been rejected. Sometimes immediate wisdom may be the harbinger of ultimate disaster.

The kind of argument set forth above by Ferguson has been termed ‘second-order counterfactuals’,<sup>244</sup> although the alternative label ‘zero sum AH’ might be more immediately intelligible when the effect is eventually to bring the alternative history ‘back to something resembling our world’.<sup>245</sup> The underlying theory need not necessarily be deterministic:

‘Second-order counterfactuals’ [...] accept and build on initial or first-order counterfactuals. [...] The effect in the first-order counterfactual then becomes the cause in the second-order counterfactual: ‘if y had happened, then we would have observed events that either take us even farther away from the world we know, z (deviation amplifying), or that cause history to revert back to our familiar z world (reversionary).’<sup>246</sup>

But when the trajectory is circular, leaving the overall course of history essentially unperturbed, it does lend itself, if not to downright determinism, to a fatalism of sorts. However, the intent might also be polemic; in the case of Ferguson’s speculation, the critique might have been levelled not so much at the efforts, by the builders of the actual EU, to avert the threat of instability and conflict in the Old Continent as to their presumed incompetence, leading to just the kind of centralistic and imperialistic outcome they set out to prevent.

When neither HC nor AF were yet *salonfähig*, the totalitarian threats of the age were perceived as connected to the present or the next future; therefore, they were exorcised through another discursive form, dystopia, ‘the narrative that images a society

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<sup>244</sup> Tetlock, p. 6.

<sup>245</sup> Roberts prefers the label ‘counter-counterfactual, whereby the most likely alternative outcome is much the same as the one that actually took place’ (Andrew Roberts, *What Might Have Been*, p. 7).

<sup>246</sup> Philip E. Tetlock and Geoffrey Parker, ‘Counterfactual Thought Experiments: Why We Can’t Live without Them and How We Must Learn to Live with Them’, in Tetlock, pp. 14-44 (p. 39 Note 12).

worse than the existing one'.<sup>247</sup> In contrast, the booming production of AH in recent years can be interpreted as an attempt to cope with the practical disappearance of the Communist threat and the loss of a grim, but nevertheless stable structure of international affairs. It is as if, after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the short-lived illusion of 'the End of History',<sup>248</sup> the West felt a stronger urgency to question itself and took less for granted its supremacy, nay, its very origins; hence the investigation of those moments in the past when this supremacy could have been effectively threatened — or prevented altogether. Thus, after the demise of the Soviet empire, the exploration of alternatives to Western predominance in world affairs has come to devote an increasing attention to the past, with widely divergent results:

Historians have long puzzled over how a relatively small number of Europeans, and their colonial offshoots, came to exert such disproportionate influence around the globe. The resulting debate has polarized scholars into feuding philosophical and ideological camps. Determinists view the West's geopolitical ascendancy as [...] inevitable, [whereas] radical antideterminists [...] believe [...] that if we were to rerun world history repeatedly from the same conditions that prevailed as recently as 1500CE, European dominance would be one of the least likely outcomes.<sup>249</sup>

A favourite point of divergence from the otherwise irresistible rise of the West has been identified in the early phase of its trajectory, that is, in the confrontation between ancient Greece and the Persian empire. In one paradigmatic reconstruction, of greater interest than the analysis of military tactics is the emphasis given to the uniqueness of Greek culture, its fundamental contribution to the making of the West as we know it, and the heroism of those who bravely held their ground against all odds, in the face of a mighty enemy:

The decade-long Persian Wars [...] offered the East the last real chance to check Western culture in its embryonic state, before the Greeks' radically dynamic menu of constitutional government, private property, broad-based militias, civilian control of military forces, free scientific inquiry, rationalism, and separation between political and religious authority would spread [...]. Indeed,

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<sup>247</sup> Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York; London: Methuen, 1986), p. 9.

<sup>248</sup> The ill-fated concept was first introduced by Francis Fukuyama in the essay 'The End of History?', which appeared in the Summer 1989 edition of *National Interest*. The full text is available at <<http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm>> [accessed 14 September 2008].

<sup>249</sup> David R. Mandel, Denis J. Hilton, and Patrizia Catellani, eds, *The Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 207.

the words freedom and citizen did not exist in the vocabulary of any other Mediterranean culture.<sup>250</sup>

Were the adoption of modern terminology not sufficient to illustrate the point, the present relevance of the confrontation is made quite explicit: ‘We should keep in mind *in this present age of multiculturalism* that Greece was a Mediterranean country in climate and agriculture only.’<sup>251</sup> Fortunately,

Themistocles and his poor Athenians not only saved Greece and embryonic Western civilization from the Persians, they also redefined the West as something more egalitarian, restless — and volatile — that would evolve into a society that we more or less recognize today.<sup>252</sup>

Even the description of the possible consequences of a Persian victory is more reminiscent of the present clash of civilizations than of the issues at stake twenty-five centuries ago:

Had Themistocles and his sailors failed [...] we would live under a much different tradition today — one where writers are under death sentences, women secluded and veiled, free speech curtailed, government in the hands of the autocrat’s extended family, universities mere centers of religious zealotry, and the thought police in our living rooms and bedrooms.<sup>253</sup>

In time — and particularly so in the wake of 9/11 — considerable focus has been placed on another perceived danger for Western civilization, and many counterhistorical texts evoke the possible unmaking of the West by an enemy ‘as new as it is old and as old as new’.<sup>254</sup> ‘A World without Islam’ is the object of one such ‘act of historical imagination’.<sup>255</sup> While lip service is paid to the role of Islam as ‘a unifying force of a high order across a wide region’, the bottom line of the argument is that nothing much would have changed without its advent. The world would have looked approximately as it does now, and so, too, would the Middle East, with much the same issues and

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<sup>250</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, ‘No Glory that Was Greece: The Persians Win at Salamis, 480 B.C.’, in Cowley, pp.15-35 (pp. 18-19).

<sup>251</sup> Cowley, p. 19; emphasis added.

<sup>252</sup> Cowley, p. 35.

<sup>253</sup> Cowley, p. 19.

<sup>254</sup> The chiasmus was coined, in quite a different context, by W. E. B. Du Bois in his definition of the ‘Criteria of Negro Art (1926)’, in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 257-260 (p. 260).

<sup>255</sup> Graham E. Fuller, ‘A World Without Islam’, *Foreign Policy*, 164 (January-February 2008), 46-53 (p. 46).

grievances:<sup>256</sup> ‘In truth, the conflicts, rivalries, and crises of such a world might not look so vastly different than the ones we know today.’<sup>257</sup> The conclusion is debatable, and may be far-fetched. Whereas surely ‘it doesn’t take a Muslim to commit terrorism’,<sup>258</sup> it is unlikely, for one, that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be as harsh as it is, if it were to be replicated in ‘a Middle East dominated by Eastern Orthodox Christianity — a church historically and psychologically suspicious of, even hostile to, the West’,<sup>259</sup> nor is it to be taken for granted that ‘other Arab peoples would still have supported the Iraqi Arabs in their trauma of occupation’.<sup>260</sup> Indeed, the point grossly overlooked in the article is that the Arab tribes might have remained as divided and backward as they were, and most likely never achieved regional diffusion and dominance, without the unifying power of a monotheistic religion and the charismatic leadership of its founder. The entire ethnic makeup of the Middle East — to say nothing of its social, political, and cultural development — would have been different, and the clash of civilizations that followed would have assumed different forms — if it had risen in the first place.

At any rate, the conclusion is opposite to the one reached by Gibbon in a famous counterfactual sketch of Britain after a Muslim conquest, which he deemed quite possible — indeed, averted by the gallantry of one Great Man:

A victorious line of march had been prolonged above a thousand miles from the rock of Gibraltar to the banks of the Loire; the repetition of an equal space would have carried the Saracens to the confines of Poland and the Highlands of Scotland; the Rhine is not more impassable than the Nile or Euphrates, and the Arabian fleet might have sailed without a naval combat into the mouth of the Thames. Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet.

From such calamities was Christendom delivered by the genius and fortune of one man. Charles, the illegitimate son of the elder Pepin, was content with the titles of mayor or duke of the Franks; but he deserved to become the father of a line of kings. [...] No sooner had he collected his forces, than he sought and found the enemy in the centre of France, between Tours and Poitiers. [...] The nations of Asia, Africa, and Europe, advanced with equal ardour to an encounter which would change the history of the world. [...] In the closer onset of the seventh day, the Orientals

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<sup>256</sup> Fuller, p. 51.

<sup>257</sup> Fuller, p. 53.

<sup>258</sup> Fuller, p. 52.

<sup>259</sup> Fuller, p. 51.

<sup>260</sup> Fuller, p. 50.

were oppressed by the strength and stature of the Germans, who, with stout hearts and iron hands, asserted the civil and religious freedom of their posterity.<sup>261</sup>

The juxtaposition of a sweeping generalizing speculation in a foreign policy journal to the work of one of the old masters of historiography may appear unfair and pointless. Yet it helps to illustrate a few interesting points:

- 1) It exemplifies the lavish use, by a great historiographer of the past, of those techniques that have always been considered the stock in trade of the writer of fiction: first the evocation of the dramatic situation with the impending danger threatening Christian civilization both in the present of the narrative and in its future projection, corresponding to the time of enunciation; then the presentation of the hero and his characterization as a man of humble origins and modest ambitions, but with the stamina needed to become, at the right time, the worthy leader of a nation of warriors — much less refined than their pagan enemies but ‘with stout hearts and iron hands’ — and, eventually, ‘the father of a line of kings’. This is the Great Man theory in a nutshell.
- 2) It shows how in history the analysis of the same object (in this instance, the long-standing *clash of civilizations* between a Muslim East and a Christian West) can lead to opposite results: to its identification, respectively, as one of the driving forces in world history, or as the mere play of religious superstructure over against a much more concrete base of economic and demographic interactions.
- 3) It confirms that counterfactual speculations, whether they are explicitly verbalized or not, are inherent in the work of the historian weighing alternative outcomes for the same processes under analysis and evaluating their plausibility. If Gibbon had estimated — and assured his readers — that

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<sup>261</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. by David Widger and commented by Henry Hart Milman, 12 vols (Project Gutenberg, 2008; first published 1776-1788 in 6 vols), V, Chap. LII <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/735/735.txt>> [accessed 29 July 2008]

Christianity would have prevailed at all events, the importance of the armed confrontation he was describing would have drastically diminished — and much of the resulting pathos become superfluous or even uncalled for. Therefore, the plausibility of a Muslim victory is craftily constructed as commonsensical; indeed, if the advance of the Muslim armies had proceeded practically unhindered for the thousand miles between Gibraltar and the Loire, the unlikely, almost wondrous event was not that they should profit from the gathered momentum and complete the conquest of a divided, riotous, and impoverished Christian Europe, but, rather, that they should be checked now, against all odds. Likewise, the mighty ‘Arabian fleet’ could easily have acquired in the North Sea the same supremacy it had won in the Mediterranean, an argument that was certain not to fall on deaf British ears. It is precisely by foreshadowing the image of an England sighing under pagan yoke — or, more dismayingly still, by then definitively converted — rather than steadfast in its faith and secure within its watery borders that Gibbon can make his readers perceive a distant (both in time and place) battle as a narrow escape and therefore an immediate threat. Not incidentally, he stresses how at the time there was no Royal Navy to avert the threat of a hostile landing on English shores, which had been the underlying fear of the inhabitants of the island throughout its history, and would continue to be.<sup>262</sup>

All alternate histories hinge on a *nexus event*, a turning point which alters the course of history;<sup>263</sup> but, while some counterfactual reconstructions restrict their focus on the crucial event — for example, a decisive battle — and its immediate aftermath, others present a description of the world at a later date, when the alteration has had time to

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<sup>262</sup> See for example George Tomkyns Chesney’s story ‘The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer’ (Edinburgh; London: Blackwood, 1871), which realistically described a future invasion of England by Germany and initiated a wave of ‘invasion literature’. See also I. F. Clarke, ‘Future-War Fiction: The First Main Phase, 1871-1900’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 73 (November 1997) <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/clarkeess.htm>> [accessed 5 May 2006].

<sup>263</sup> See Hellekson, 2001, p. 5.

produce all sorts of wide-ranging consequences. Generally speaking, the longer the temporal span considered, the harder it is to make inferences with a reasonable degree of reliability. In Hook's visual imagery:

When we draw the line of possible eventuality too far out of the immediate period, the mind staggers under the cumulative weight of the unforeseen. That is why prophecy is such a hazardous vocation. [...] We may compare the process of history to a gnarled ancient tree, still in healthy growth, whose trunk is the human race with interlacing boughs arching in many directions. Along each bough, large and then smaller limbs branch off, down to the very twigs. Here and there signs point to a branch of a twin stem that had been lopped off, while its other has grown to tremendous dimensions. [...] We can easily imagine boughs of the tree in places where there are none now, less easily the branches that might have forked from these absent boughs, but we can guess only wildly at where the twigs and leaves would stem off from our imagined branches.<sup>264</sup>

But short-term predictions can also prove hard and unreliable. Indeed, the sudden collapse of the Soviet system in Eastern Europe is a case study in unpredictability, as its likeness had been all but ignored by experts and policy-makers to the very last.<sup>265</sup> Another notorious example is the failure to predict Hitler's seizure of power by political opponents and commentators alike.<sup>266</sup>

Unsurprisingly, historians tend to be wary of alternate historical scenarios stretching over a long period, as with the passing of time, too many variables might intervene and should be introduced in the simulation for the outcome to have an acceptable degree of predictability.<sup>267</sup>

The complexity can quickly become staggering. The counterfactual historian confronts metastasizing networks of counterfactual inference about how 'if x had happened, then probably y would have followed, and if y, then possibly...' The number of nodes on uncertainty thus has the potential to expand exponentially.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Hook, pp. 134-135.

<sup>265</sup> See Mark Almond, '1989 without Gorbachev: What If Communism Had Not Collapsed?', in Ferguson, pp. 392-415. In fact, to this day the *Pravda* argues that the Soviet Union never collapsed in the first place; rather, 'the voluntary dissolution of the Soviet Union was forecast and accounted for in its Constitution'. Timothy Bancroft-Hinchey, 'LA Times: A Classic Example of Disinformation', *Pravda*, 13 August 2008 <<http://english.pravda.ru/opinion/columnists/106083-0>> [accessed 25 August 2008]. Which may be a euphemism, or a form of counterfactual reasoning in its own right.

<sup>266</sup> Tetlock, pp. 363-364. More excusable, on the other hand, was the prognostication that Hitler would retire from politics after the failure of his Munich *putsch*: 'Hitler Tamed by Prison: Released on Parole, He Is Expected to Return to Austria', *New York Times*, 21 December 1924, p. 16.

<sup>267</sup> Andrew Roberts, *What Might Have Been*, p. 8.

<sup>268</sup> Tetlock, p. 6.

Not incidentally, this is the same kind of problems experts encounter in the forecast of weather conditions beyond a certain date, which brought Edward N. Lorenz to develop Chaos theory.<sup>269</sup>

Significantly, in Ferguson's Introduction to *Virtual History* — rather emphatically defined by Roberts as 'the undisputed Ur-text of the philosophy behind counterfactual history'<sup>270</sup> — the final section bears the title 'Towards Chaosstory', as in both natural phenomena and history 'chaos — stochastic behaviour in deterministic systems — means unpredictable outcomes even when successive events are causally linked'.<sup>271</sup> Thus, 'chaotic events may be governed by deterministic laws, but their complexity usually prohibits prediction'.<sup>272</sup>

Theoretically, we could predict the outcome when we toss a coin if we knew exactly its vertical velocity and rotations per second. In practice, it's too difficult — and the same applies *a fortiori* in more complex processes. [However,] 'chaos' does *not* mean anarchy. It does *not* mean that there are no laws in the natural world. It means simply that those laws are so complex that it is virtually impossible for us to make accurate predictions, so that much of what happens around us *seems* to be random or chaotic.<sup>273</sup>

The application of Chaos theory to history makes it possible to reconcile the notions of causality and contingency. Of course, this does not mean that every possible outcome should be taken into consideration:

By narrowing down the historical alternatives we consider to those which are *plausible* — and hence by replacing the enigma of 'chance' with the calculation of *probabilities* — we solve the dilemma of choosing between a single deterministic past and an unmanageably infinite number of possible pasts.<sup>274</sup>

However, there is still a crucial question:

How *exactly* are we to distinguish probable unrealized alternatives from improbable ones? [...] The answer [...] is in fact very simple: We should consider as plausible or probable *only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered*.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Kenneth Chang, 'Edward N. Lorenz, a Meteorologist and a Father of Chaos Theory, Dies at 90', *New York Times*, 17 April 2008.

<sup>270</sup> Andrew Roberts, *What Might Have Been*, p. 8.

<sup>271</sup> Ferguson, pp. 79-90 (p. 79).

<sup>272</sup> Tucker, pp. 268-269.

<sup>273</sup> Ferguson, pp. 76-77.

<sup>274</sup> Ferguson, p. 85.

<sup>275</sup> Ferguson, p. 86; emphasis in the original.

Ideally, counterfactual historians should adopt the opposite method from that of writers of narrative; instead of constructing their argument as inevitably leading to the predetermined end, they should situate themselves in the same position as the contemporaries of the events concerned, who were faced with an ongoing process whose outcome still lay, unknown and uncertain, before them:<sup>276</sup> ‘For historians, as the maxim goes, the dominos fall backward. In *What If?* we will attempt to make them fall forward.’<sup>277</sup> A very similar concept is expressed by Roberts:

For all our knowledge of the past we can’t look one minute into the future, and so it is not really legitimate to feel superior to the actors of the past who had to take their daily decisions not knowing what we know now. The absurdity of Louis XVI on 13 July 1789, as he contemplates with equanimity the next day’s hunting at Fontainebleau, seems complete, but only because we know what was about to happen to the Bastille on the fourteenth.<sup>278</sup>

While rejecting teleological determinism, historians who write counterfactuals cannot subscribe to a view that would consign history to randomness, and their efforts to the idleness of ‘cocktail party conversations’<sup>279</sup> — a stigma which they are still fighting to overcome, in the attempt to find ‘a respectable basis for counterfactual reasoning in matters of history’.<sup>280</sup>

History is rarely, if ever, like coin tossing: rather, it is a path-dependent system with positive feedback. It resembles a vortex in which what has already happened quickly accentuates the probability of certain events and reduces that of others, making escape from the new path difficult.<sup>281</sup>

This means that the pursuit of speculation on historical events following the initial change introduced in a counterfactual is not entirely arbitrary, since the likelihood of the whole path is not the result of the mere sum of the probabilities for each successive event in the chain, which would yield a very low probability indeed; rather, once set in motion the alternative chain acquires a dynamics of its own, more like the domino chips falling one after another once the first in the row has been tipped than like the dice cast for several times, without a ‘memory’ influencing each successive cast: ‘Once things start

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<sup>276</sup> Ferguson, pp. 86-87.

<sup>277</sup> Cowley, p. xiv.

<sup>278</sup> Andrew Roberts, *What Might Have Been*, p. 5.

<sup>279</sup> Bulhof, p. 146.

<sup>280</sup> Bunzl (para. 1 of 35).

<sup>281</sup> Tetlock, p. 372.

moving in any particular direction, they pick up momentum, increasing the odds of further movement in the same direction and rapidly transforming the improbable into the inevitable'. Thus, after the 'initial unpredictability and massive potential for random effect', there is 'a steady increase in inflexibility (and reduced potential for butterfly effects)'.<sup>282</sup>

The tendency of the flow of historical events to resist the forces that would alter its equilibrium, but only until the tipping point is reached, is best illustrated with reference to Catastrophe theory. Presented in 1972 by mathematician René Thom, it holds that if a system is subjected to change forces, it will initially try to react and preserve its equilibrium. However, the forces can become so strong that they cannot be absorbed; thus catastrophic change occurs and a new equilibrium is eventually reached.<sup>283</sup> Very importantly, the analogy between nexus events in HC and the tipping points of Catastrophe theory might confer some scientific respectability to counterfactual thought experiments by linking them to state-of-the-art theories describing physical phenomena. Unlike the physical world, however, history is scarcely — if at all — analyzable in terms of regularities and parameters defined and verified according to a protocol.

While the identification of 'plausible alternatives' can be a working method — and one apt to restrict the scope of counterfactual speculation — it is debatable whether the definition should be reserved only for the options actually considered at the time and whose evaluation and rejection has been recorded. Why should historians confine their speculation within the borders of the imagination of the contemporaries? And should all

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<sup>282</sup> Tetlock, pp. 20-21. The opposite stance is apparently adopted, however, when it is postulated that 'the deeper authors try to see into the futures of their counterfactual worlds, the frailer their connecting principles become, [...] because [...] the overall probability of a multilinkage argument cannot be greater than [...] the probability of the weakest link in the chain of events' (Tetlock, pp. 34-35).

<sup>283</sup> A catastrophe can be defined as 'any discontinuous transition that occurs when a system can have more than one stable state, or can follow more than one stable pathway of change. The catastrophe is the "jump" from one state or pathway to another.' Evelyn Cobley, 'Catastrophe Theory in Tom Stoppard's *Professional Foul*', *Contemporary Literature*, 25.1 (Spring 1984), 53-65 (p. 57). See also Alexander Woodcock and Monte Davis, *Catastrophe Theory* (New York: Dutton, 1978), pp. 7-8.

contemporary opinions be taken into account, or only those expressed by persons invested with the relevant authority? And what of the huge amount of discussions involved in the decision-making process that have gone unreported because the records have not been preserved, or never existed?

One possible solution is the application to AH of Dray's theory of history, which takes into account the factors evaluated by the actors of history while it was on the making, the *calculation* or rationale behind their actions.<sup>284</sup> Counterfactual reasoning is inherent in historiography, as the establishment of historical causes cannot proceed by predicating events on the basis of the application of general laws, but, rather, pragmatically and inductively, by the identification of the necessary conditions for the singular event to take place: X can be said to have caused Y if it can be said that, without X, Y would never have happened. The identification of the causes of historical events thus entails the analysis of the possible alternative courses that history could or could not have taken:

Le critère pragmatique inclut ce qui a précipité le cours des choses : l'étincelle, le catalyseur. [...] L'épreuve inductive [...] n'équivaut pas à une explication suffisante ; tout au plus constitue-t-elle une explication nécessaire, en éliminant de la liste des candidats au rôle de cause les facteurs dont l'absence n'aurait pas changé le cours des choses.<sup>285</sup>

Moreover, the theory nicely dovetails with the Great Man theory, since it stresses the importance of individual decision-making in history. On the other hand, it does not explain satisfactorily those historical processes that are irreducible to individual action but are rather the product of collective and impersonal forces.<sup>286</sup>

A further step is needed for the synthesis of heterogeneous causal processes. Such could be the application to historiography of Danto's analysis of 'narrative sentences'. It equates the reconstruction of historical events to any other narrative, which reconstructs the past from the general vantage point of the present, and establishes causal links *in retrospective*, by anticipating the future import of an event — the effect it will be

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<sup>284</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 173-187. See also William Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

<sup>285</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 180.

<sup>286</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 185-187.

the cause of. A paradigmatic example is given in the sentence: ‘In 1717 the author of the *Neveu de Rameau* was born.’ No one at the time could have identified in the new-born child the future philosopher and author Diderot. Therefore Ideal Chroniclers cannot exist: they should be able to record history thoroughly and faithfully, adding and omitting nothing, giving ‘une transcription instantanée de ce qui arrive, [...] de façon purement additive et cumulative’;<sup>287</sup> moreover, they would have to know in advance the future developments that will confer full meaning on the events they are witnessing.<sup>288</sup>

Thus, not only the future but also the past is open, if not to direct intervention leading to change, to rearrangement and revision of the events that produced the present. In this respect, Aristotle’s stance concerning the immutability of the past might be too rigid:

(Choice is not concerned with what has happened already: for example, no one chooses to have sacked Troy; for neither does one deliberate about what has happened in the past, but about what still lies in the future and may happen or not; what has happened cannot be made not to have happened. Hence Agathon is right in saying  
This only is denied even to God,  
The power to make what has been done undone.)<sup>289</sup>

Ultimately, the tension can never be satisfactorily resolved between the tentative and partial knowledge of events while they are still in progress — and perceived as through a scanner, darkly — and their systematization and rationalization *a posteriori*. Nor can it be denied that this systematizing activity, whether intentionally or unintentionally, explicitly or implicitly, entails the modification, to some extent, of our knowledge of the past, which is inevitably mediated through its reconstruction. A revisionist is only an alternate historian in disguise.

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<sup>287</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 203-211 (pp. 206-207). See also A. C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

<sup>288</sup> Another example is the failure, by the writer of the *Annals of Saint Gall*, to record the Battle of Tours, whose decisive importance can be assessed only through knowledge of the subsequent history of Europe: see Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 9.

<sup>289</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. by H. Rackham, 1, II.[6] <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin//ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0054;query=toc;layout=;loc=1138b%2018>> [accessed 27 November 2006].

#### 1.2.4. The Once and Future History of the World As It Isn't: AH in Broader Literary Context

ELWOOD Er... what kind of music do you usually have here?  
CLAIRE Oh, we got both kinds. We got Country, and Western.  
(Dan Aykroyd and John Landis, *The Blues Brothers*)

At this point, after defining the boundaries inscribing AH within the general field of discourse — whether referential or fictional — about history, and separating its fictional part from its speculative kin the historical counterfactual, some attention should be devoted, on the one hand, to the distinction between AH and conspiracy theory: the latter is a type of discourse claiming that an alteration to past records (rather than events) did take place and some crucial information has been kept secret as a consequence. On the other hand, one should consider the space allotted to AH within the genre where it is generally situated, SF in its multifarious aspects and as distinguished from non-fictional extrapolation about future history or more or less static descriptions of alternatives to contemporaneous society, as in utopia/dystopia. Lastly, there will follow a discussion of the relationship between AH and the more general postmodernist play with a past no longer taken for granted.

In the list given above, one of the most used — if not abused — motifs in science fiction has been omitted, but not incidentally. Time travel is a *chronotope*<sup>290</sup> if ever there was one, attributing thematic relevance to both time and place and establishing a peculiar relationship between them. Nevertheless, much as it is relevant to the analysis of how the idea of history as the record of human existence in time can be foregrounded, time travel in itself does not necessarily overlap with AH. The movement between different places and ages might not concern the past; or if it does, the visitors could leave the general course of events unaffected. Conversely, the alternative past can be brought about without recourse to time-travelling technology; indeed, in many allohistorical

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<sup>290</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996; first published 1981), pp. 84-258.

narratives there exists no communication between our present and the alternative timeline. Thus, time travel stories need not be AH, nor does AH need anyone from the future actively to intrude into — and interfere with — the past. Admittedly, however, it is difficult for the time travellers to remain — and for the narrator to let them be — neutral observers of a reality where they do not belong, and where, facile as it may be as a narrative device, they are apt to make mistakes with unforeseen, cumulative consequences.

Whereas an absolutely impossible counterfactual account of events would not even be admitted as an ‘idle parlour game’<sup>291</sup> — let alone in academic writing — the reverse is certainly not a prerequisite of AF; more often than not the plausibility of the hypothesis presented is supported by painstakingly detailed — and mostly accurate — historical documentation. Yet time travel is a wild card that instantly removes any plausibility constraint: once introduced into the narrative, the time machine makes it possible to smuggle anything back to the desired age, from the protagonist’s historical knowledge in Ward Moore’s *Bring the Jubilee*<sup>292</sup> to a whole arsenal of anachronistic weaponry in Poul Anderson’s classic *Time Patrol* series. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the premises, this plot device has been criticized for originating ‘a plethora of ludic, a modicum of disquisitive, and a poverty of serious treatments’.<sup>293</sup>

The risk of entering a *time loop* legitimating the most improbable twists of the plot is denounced by Lem, according to whom time travel stories are prone to sheer escapism, in which a circular causal structure generates logical impossibilities such as individuals giving birth to themselves: ‘All structures of the time-loop variety are internally contradictory in a causal sense’, but they need not be ‘reduced to the construction of comic antinomies for the sake of pure entertainment. The causal circle may be employed not as the goal of the story, but as a means of visualizing certain theses, e.g. from the philosophy of history’ and corresponding to two ‘mutually exclusive

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<sup>291</sup> Cowley, p. xi.

<sup>292</sup> Ward Moore, *Bring the Jubilee* (London: Gollancz, 2001; first published in book form 1953).

<sup>293</sup> Collins, p. 114.

[...] authorial attitudes': history can be considered either *ergodic* — i.e., resistant to change and capable of self-adjustment even though someone has been 'monkeying with events' — or chaotically *anti-ergodic*, as even apparently insignificant events can have enormous, unpredictable consequences.<sup>294</sup>

The paradoxes generated by time travel stories can be conveniently explained away by positing the coexistence rather than the incompatibility of the different realities. Each point of divergence does not destroy the possible alternative; on the contrary, both forking paths are pursued and result in independent realities enjoying the same ontological status. If the storylines are kept distinct,

this lack of interference [creates] different stories rather than a unified plot encompassing parallel realities. [...] In a fully integrated multiverse narrative, by contrast, characters either travel physically from branch to branch or know with certainty that other branches exist objectively. This knowledge affects their behavior and consequently alters the history of their own universe.<sup>295</sup>

Be this as it may, within a singular universe in which only one of the possible alternatives obtains, the analysis of possible future events is faced by a crucial contradiction:

Se prononcer sur le future, c'est extrapoler des configurations et des enchaînements du passé en direction de l'avenir ; et cette extrapolation, [...] constitutive de la prophétie, consiste à parler du futur dans des termes appropriés au passé. Mais il ne peut y avoir d'histoire du futur [...] en raison de la nature des phrases narratives, qui redécrivent les événements passés à la lumière d'événements ultérieurs inconnus des acteurs eux-mêmes.<sup>296</sup>

Thus, the foreclosure of alternative outcomes that is typical of narratives makes predictions about the future hard even to formulate in the rhetorical mode that is typical of historical discourse, since assertions about events for which there are as yet no data available cannot be made with a sufficient degree of accuracy:

Historians cannot [...] be justified in writing narrative sentences about the future because we cannot place ourselves at such a temporal distance from the present so as to see the context and

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<sup>294</sup> Stanislaw Lem, 'The Time-Travel story and Related Matters of SF Structuring', in R. D. Mullen and Darko Suvin, eds, *Science-Fiction Studies: Selected Articles on Science Fiction 1973-1975* (Boston: Gregg, 1976), pp. 16-27 (pp. 18-20).

<sup>295</sup> Ryan, 2006, p. 656.

<sup>296</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 204-205.

consequences of events in the present. Any historian who writes narrative sentences about the future is making a prediction that the historian is not in a position to justify.<sup>297</sup>

Rather, those who still wish to apply historical methods to the future should turn to *scenario writing*:

The goal of scenario writing is not to predict the one path the future will follow but to discern the possible states toward which the future might be 'attracted'. If a prediction is a definitive statement of what the future will be, then scenarios are heuristic statements that explore the plausibilities of what might be.<sup>298</sup>

The key concept of *plausibility* appears to ground this sort of scenarios in the same extrapolative procedures as those employed for HC, which are faced with similar problems of sensitivity to initial conditions and cumulative effects, all adding up to the complexity of the causal processes to be analyzed:

Scenario thinkers recognize that there is not one sequential path to the future but that the complexities of the interaction between social forces can produce different outcomes. While not dependent upon the same computational procedures as deterministic chaos, scenario thinking shares a similar intuitive understanding of the complexities of foresight.<sup>299</sup>

Generally absent from scenarios thus construed are the uniqueness of a linear sequence of events and specific reference to individuals or dates; rather, they present a series of plausible contexts that could emerge from the development of present trends. The result is thus *fuzzier*, both more complex and less clearly defined than traditional narratives — 'a more realistic approach to the complexities of the future than the hubristic confidence suggested by a prediction'.<sup>300</sup>

Such limitations are not operative in SF, whose independence from actuality allows for the exploration of alternatives in the past, present, or future:

De tous les événements historiques éventuellement possibles, l'Histoire étudie ceux qui se sont effectivement produits. Tous les autres, c'est la SF qui nous les raconte. L'Histoire n'est plus alors qu'un cas très particulier de la science-fiction.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> David J. Staley, 'A History of the Future', *History and Theory*, 41.4 (December 2002), 72-89 (pp. 75-76).

<sup>298</sup> Staley, p. 78.

<sup>299</sup> Staley, p. 79.

<sup>300</sup> Staley, p. 81.

<sup>301</sup> Jean-Jacques Régnier, 'L'Histoire, un cas particulier de la science-fiction', *Cycnos*, 22.1 <<http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/document.html?id=459>> [accessed 3 July 2008].

Which sounds much like the generic imperialism — bordering on hubris — exhibited by Joseph Campbell, the editor of *Astounding Science-Fiction* — the ‘pulp’ magazine which, together with Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*, established SF as a hugely popular genre in the interbellum — who claimed:

That group of writings which is usually referred to as ‘mainstream literature’ is actually a special subgroup of the field of science fiction — for science fiction deals with all places in the Universe, and all times in Eternity, so the literature of the here-and-now is, truly, a subset of science fiction.<sup>302</sup>

Campbell may have had a point as far as scope of the subject matter is concerned, but only if SF is compared to realist literature, whose conventions bind it to the depiction of a fairly faithful image of everyday reality — ‘the author’s empirical environment’, in Suvin’s definition.<sup>303</sup> Furthermore, the fantastic element in SF proper is balanced — if not offset — by a cognitive element, i.e., the extrapolation from present or foreseeable scientific trends, rather than the free rein given to the imagination. It is *invention*, rather than *creation*, in Steiner’s terminology.<sup>304</sup>

The approach to the imaginary locality, or localized daydream, practiced by the genre of SF is a supposedly factual one. Columbus’ (technically or genologically non-fictional) letter on the Eden he glimpsed beyond the Orinoco mouth, and Swift’s (technically non-factual) voyage to ‘Laputa, Balnibarbi, Glubbubbdrub, Luggnagg and Japan’, stand at the opposite ends of a ban between imaginary and factual possibilities. Thus SF takes off from a fictional (‘literary’) hypothesis and develops it with extrapolating and totalizing (‘scientific’) rigor—in genre, Columbus and Swift are more alike than different.<sup>305</sup>

If SF is ‘a literature of ideas predicated on some substantive difference or differences between the world described and the world in which readers actually live’,

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<sup>302</sup> Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 75. See also Edward James, *Science Fiction in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p. 57. For a compelling history of the genre, see Brian W. Aldiss and David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Gollancz, 1986).

<sup>303</sup> Darko Suvin, ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre’, *College English*, 34.3 (December 1972), 372-382 (p. 375).

<sup>304</sup> Steiner distinguishes between the totally free *fiat* of creation and the combinatorial activity of invention, bound to ‘pragmatic possibilities as these are offered by the availability or manufacture of new materials’: although he refers primarily to material production, the same conditions could apply to literature in general and SF in particular, which extrapolates from the existing world rather than creating totally new ones. George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 183. See also Daniel Punday, ‘Creative Accounting: Role-playing Games, Possible-World Theory, and the Agency of Imagination’, *Poetics Today*, 26.1 (Spring 2005), 113-139 (p. 127).

<sup>305</sup> Suvin, 1972, p. 374.

then ‘alternative histories’ can be rightfully included among the ‘premises’ or ‘points of difference’ that generate the fictional world.<sup>306</sup> Indeed, even the SF / Fantasy dichotomy could be preserved at subgeneric level and help separate alternate histories based on plausible, HC-like nexus events from those in which the nature of the change is more or less fantastic, and the results so conflicting with the existing world that they can hardly be derived from it — in a sense, a Fantasy does not even need a nexus event to explain it, so alien its ontology is to ours.

However, it is debatable whether AH should simply be listed — together with spaceships, aliens, robots, computers, time travel, and futuristic utopias/dystopias — among the ‘subjects, themes, trappings or props’ that are the stock in trade of SF writers, or whether it should be recognized as a separate subcategory of texts whose ontological constitution is grounded in the negation of — rather than extrapolation from — the real world.<sup>307</sup> Within certain limits —which Fantasy transcends, but even science may overcome as a result of unforeseen innovation, although it cannot trespass the laws of the known universe — the future is the realm of possibility: if it be not now, yet it still may come. In contrast, deliberately changing the past is an act of creative imagination if ever there was one. Thus, Hellekson’s claim that ‘alternate histories [...] change the present by transforming the past’ could be interpreted in two different — but equally fruitful — ways:<sup>308</sup>

- literally, if the text is a ‘true alternate history’ in Hellekson’s taxonomy — i.e., it begins or extends after the nexus event<sup>309</sup> — and stretches to include the description of a different present from ours;
- more indirectly, as our understanding of the present could be altered — to some extent, it inevitably is — by a different outlook on how it came about and how it could have been different, unless the story discusses the

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<sup>306</sup> Adam Roberts, pp. 2-3.

<sup>307</sup> Adam Roberts, pp. 14-15.

<sup>308</sup> Karen Hellekson, ‘Toward a Taxonomy of the Alternate History Genre’, *Extrapolation* (Kent State University Press), 41.3 (Fall 2000), 248-256 (p. 249).

<sup>309</sup> Hellekson, 2000, p. 251.

possibility of an alternative course of history only to reject it as impossible or leading, ultimately, to the same outcome even in the altered circumstances, a procedure similar to the ‘anti-utopia’ described by Kumar.<sup>310</sup>

In fact, the utopia/dystopia opposition should be better qualified than it usually is, by a more sophisticated probing of the text’s ethical attitude than the mere determination of whether the world described is a ‘nightmare’ or a ‘fantasy’.<sup>311</sup> It should always be kept in mind that not only uchronia but also utopia has a *presentist* aspect to it, as the judgement it expresses concerns both the alternative presented and the contemporary society it is juxtaposed to, whether explicitly or by mere implication. Thus, a correct analysis should not limit itself to the question as to whether the text depicts a heaven or a hell, but extend to how the alternative society compares to the one in which the writer lives; a hellish alternative could elicit either a pang of recognition at the sight of a mirror image of the readers’ own predicament, or a sigh of relief at the thought that such a ghastly fate has been spared to them. Furthermore, opinions about the same societal project can vary, both synchronically according to one’s ideological stance and diachronically, as values and perspectives evolve: More’s *Utopia* might have offered a fairer alternative to the highly hierarchical society of the time; but it is doubtful whether modern readers would be enticed by the prospect of living under the enforced egalitarianism posited by the text.

Utopian and dystopian visions are not necessarily diametrical opposites. Not only is one man’s utopia another man’s dystopia, but utopian visions of an ideal society often inherently suggest a criticism of the current order of things as nonideal, while dystopian warnings of the danger of ‘bad’ utopias still allow for the possibility of ‘good’ utopias, especially since dystopian societies are generally more or less thinly veiled refigurations of a situation that already exists in reality.<sup>312</sup>

Thus, the various texts — either utopian or uchronian — should first be examined according to their positive or negative image of the society they posit,

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<sup>310</sup> Krishan Kumar, ‘Anti-Utopia, Shadow of Utopia’, in *Utopia and anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 99-130.

<sup>311</sup> See Rosenfeld, 2002, p. 93.

<sup>312</sup> M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (Westport, CT; London: Greenwood, 1994), p. 15.

resulting in either a Eutopia — or Positive Utopia — or a Dystopia — or Negative Utopia, respectively.<sup>313</sup> Subsequently, one should measure the proximity to — or distance from — such a society of the one in which the text is produced, thus distinguishing four basic attitudes:

- 1) Direct Eutopia/Euchronia, or positive image of a society that is fundamentally different from contemporary society;
- 2) Indirect Dystopia/Dyschronia, or negative image of a society that is a thinly disguised version of contemporary society;
- 3) Direct Dystopia/Dyschronia, or negative image of a society that is fundamentally different from contemporary society;
- 4) Indirect Eutopia/Euchronia, or positive image of a society that is a thinly disguised version of contemporary society.

The first two categories express — directly or by comparison — a critique of contemporary society, whereas the third indirectly approves of the ways of the world as it is by positing that the alternative would be worse. As for the fourth, the apologetic strategy of arguing that all goes for the best in the best of all possible worlds would make for cheap comedy — or blatant propaganda — and is therefore unlikely to appeal to the disenchanted readership of today; it would result in a banalized form of eutopia, ‘indulging our atavistic desire for a special kind of orderliness, the simple, calm, orderliness found in childhood, a bliss ignorant of sex and [...] of the full knowledge of personal autonomy’, but deprived of the endearing displacement to another, almost mythical time or place, ‘a consolation for today cast in the forms of tomorrow but borrowed [...] from our own personal past’ with its lost innocence.<sup>314</sup> Much more reassuring is the cathartic effect of seeing one’s anxieties dissolved by the confirmation of the ethical foundations of society in the face of the evil that would shake them.

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<sup>313</sup> Since ‘utopia’ is also used as a comprehensive term for all descriptions of non-existent societies, ‘eutopia’ is a better, unambiguous antonym for ‘dystopia’.

<sup>314</sup> For a discussion of this ‘atavistic’ aspect, see Eric S. Rabkin, ‘Atavism and Utopia’, in Eric S. Rabkin, Martin H. Greenberg, and Joseph D. Olander, *No Place Else: Explorations in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), pp. 1-10 (p. 10).

Apparently similar are classifications distinguishing between utopia/eutopia (as expressive of ‘radical hope’) and anti-utopia (expressing ‘cynicism’ and ‘despair’) on the one hand, and dystopia as ‘militant pessimism’ and pseudo-dystopia as ‘resigned pessimism’ on the other hand.<sup>315</sup> A crucial difference is that in the classification proposed above the value judgement on the society described is clearly pronounced from within the text and anchored to the concrete context wherein the text was produced, thus becoming more easily and objectively identifiable and verifiable, whereas an external judgement on the progressive or reactionary nature of the text is inevitably dependent on the ideological frame of mind of the individual reader and interpreter. The analytical advantage of ‘keeping the connotative values of the immediately political terms *militant* and *resigned*’ is not self-evident, nor is the critic supposed to stand ‘with world-changing humanity in the front line of the historical process’ and embrace change for change’s sake as a decisive aesthetic criterion.<sup>316</sup> As Kumar argues:

To say that this [i.e., to claim the superior literary qualities of dystopian over utopian texts] is yet another case of the devil’s having all the best tunes is, of course, to prejudge the question of just who are the angels and who the devils in the conflict between utopia and anti-utopia.<sup>317</sup>

As this last quote shows, another advantage of sticking to the primarily intra-textual parameters proposed above is the prevention of possible ambiguity. Kumar defines both *1984* and *Brave New World* as specimen of “‘utopia in the negative’, the anti-utopia or dystopia’, which may ingenerate some terminological confusion in an otherwise compelling overview of utopianism ancient and modern.<sup>318</sup>

Terminological disputes notwithstanding, a clearcut distinction should be maintained between AH, concerned with counterfactual versions of the past — which is determined once and for all — and science fiction proper, exploring some of the virtually infinite possibilities for the future. The ever-shifting present point along the time axis is also what separates alternate history from utopian and dystopian literature. Indeed, the

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<sup>315</sup> Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), p. 157.

<sup>316</sup> See Moylan, 2000, pp. 153-154.

<sup>317</sup> Kumar, p. ix.

<sup>318</sup> Kumar, chaps 7 and 8, pp. 224-346 (p. 224).

term *uchronia* and its French antecedent *uchronie* are more often than not understood to refer — much like Suvin's 'alternative history' — to the shift from the spatial, static utopia<sup>319</sup> to 'la projection de l'utopie dans le temps', Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1771) being the prototype of the genre.<sup>320</sup>

Yet, as time advances, the future of yesterday is inexorably pushed back to become the past of today, and even the dystopian world of *1984*, once the time of its prophecy is past, becomes no longer an admonishment about what could still be but rather a reminder of what could have been.<sup>321</sup> True, the power of its indictment of the danger of totalitarianism transcends the contingent forms that the latter can assume in a particular age;<sup>322</sup> nevertheless, the original warning was clearly meant to hold a mirror up to the politics of the time and the nefarious course it might take at that particular juncture.

Ultimately, it may be necessary to recover the much vituperated notion of authorial intention, as different works could be all but impossible to ascribe to one genre or the other on textual grounds alone. While revisionism / negationism blatantly denies historical evidence and replaces it with a version domesticated or subverted for political or ideological ends, for instance by granting disgruntled losers a triumphal comeback, conspiracy theory operates more subtly, by sowing the seeds of doubt into its readers and suggesting that what we do know about history is only surface, and that behind the façade lurk unpalatable hidden truths. A shorthand for the conspiracy theory concept is given in *Libra*:

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<sup>319</sup> 'In utopian texts [...] the societal imagery takes precedence over character and especially over plot'. Moylan, 1986, p. 45.

<sup>320</sup> Hinrich Hudde and Peter Kuon, 'Utopie — Uchronie — et après: Une réévaluation de l'utopie des Lumières', in *De l'Utopie à l'Uchronie: Formes, Significations, Fonctions*, ed. by Hinrich Hudde and Peter Kuon (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1988), pp. 9-17 (p. 14).

<sup>321</sup> The notion of *retroactive alternate histories* has been introduced for such narratives. Gavriel David Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 399.

<sup>322</sup> Jonathan Freedland, 'The Start of History', *Guardian*, 15 September 2004.

There's something they aren't telling us. Something we don't know about. There's more to it. There's always more to it. This is what history consists of. It's the sum total of all the things they aren't telling us.<sup>323</sup>

Correspondingly, for Henriette 'l'histoire secrète est un récit qui développe la thèse classique du "on nous cache tout, on nous dit rien!"<sup>324</sup>

Quite predictably, writers of HC will dismiss an approach that would substantially undermine their efforts and, in a sense, the respectability of the historian's profession as such, since conspiracy theory implies that those who have written false historical accounts were either deceivers or deceived:

If history teaches us anything about human affairs it is the fatalistic but also faintly reassuring truth that at the end of every triumphal procession there is an open manhole cover. Of course we can never know for certain whether it was left open by accident or by design, but the cock-up theory of history has always seemed to me to be far more plausible than the conspiracy one, not least because of human aptitude: we are even better at cock-ups than we are at conspiracies.<sup>325</sup>

In its postulating not only that history *could* have been different, but that it actually *was* and we have been deprived of key knowledge about crucial aspects of the past, conspiracy theory [CT] may well be considered modernist rather than postmodernist, since its concerns are epistemic rather than ontological.<sup>326</sup> Its declared purpose is thus not the remaking but the rewriting of history, whose previous accounts had not been truthful and complete. There is but one world and one truth about it, whose full import has been kept secret but is perfectly knowable, once the adequate tools and transparency have been made available. Indeed, the alternate reality is, in a sense, the one fabricated by those who have suppressed or concealed a decisive part of the record, which is now going to be unearthed by the writer of a finally genuine history. Just how far the epistemic/ontological distinction is tenable, in a world where an event does not exist that has not previously been mediated, is a question best left to the philosophers.

At any rate, CT is not incompatible with the extant records. In other words, the content of the newspapers need not change and does document the past, a partial,

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<sup>323</sup> DeLillo, *Libra*, p. 321.

<sup>324</sup> Henriette, p. 40; emphasis in the original text.

<sup>325</sup> Andrew Roberts, *What Might Have Been*, p. 14.

<sup>326</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999; first published 1987), pp. 9-11.

imperfect version of the past and badly in need of amendment and completion, but still part of the general sequence of events acknowledged by the conspiracy theorists themselves.

The preservation of existing historical records is also what characterizes the parallel/alternate biographies — or individual alternate histories — described in movies such as *Lola rennt* [Run, Lola, Run]<sup>327</sup> and *Sliding Doors*,<sup>328</sup> which show how the life of the protagonist — and other characters — is altered, even dramatically, by their being one moment earlier or later.<sup>329</sup> But, admittedly, this is not always the case. In the Frank Capra classic *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), the protagonist's death may well become a headline in the local newspaper for his guardian angel to show him as evidence of his rash deed and the chain of unpleasant consequences for the whole community it initiated.

Unless it concerned some minor incidents that would not affect the general course of their lives, the alteration of the biographies of key historical figures would inevitably form material for news coverage — indeed, for downright historiography. While this could hardly be denied even by the staunchest opponent of the Great Man theory, the reverse is not necessarily true. In a chaotic world, apparently minor causes can produce major effects.

Every art critic will acknowledge that the alteration of the face of the Madonna at the centre of a huge fresco will make a huge qualitative difference, although, in quantitative terms, it involves only a minor portion of the total surface. By contrast, the modification of a corresponding surface in the background will be deemed of scarce relevance, even more so if the change concerns one of the minuscule strokes that compose the overall picture, and whose presence or absence will be barely noticed — if at all — by the eye of the beholder.

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<sup>327</sup> *Lola rennt*. Dir. Tom Tykwer. Prokino Filmverleih. 1998.

<sup>328</sup> *Sliding Doors*. Dir. Peter Howitt. Miramax / Paramount. 1998.

<sup>329</sup> See Rosenfeld, 2005, p. 8.

Turning from a visual to an aural metaphor, the rewinding of the tape — to borrow an image from Stephen Jay Gould, the great evolutionary biologist<sup>330</sup> — will never yield exactly the same music at the next reproduction; but the alteration may be indiscernible by the ear of the listener, if it produces minor static noise while leaving the overall tune unaffected. Of course, this implies that there be a clear, perceivable pattern in the succession of sounds, that history does have a melody that can be recognized and set down in a music score. While only determinists will claim that the music is inexorably attuned to the vibration of the celestial spheres and the score — just like the instruments, the musicians, and the concert hall — is ultimately the creation of the Supreme Composer, every historians will posit that their subject matter has a pattern that can be discovered and described, that the soundtrack of human life on this planet is not just *White Noise* — as in DeLillo's novel.<sup>331</sup>

As a logical consequence, what has structure has a meaning which is given by the structure itself. If the structure changes, so does the meaning. Although definitive agreement may never be reached in the dispute as to what exactly should constitute the *deep structure* and what the accidental surface features of narratives — what is the soul and what are the limbs and outward flourishes — it is intuitive that some events in the narrative chain are pivotal, whereas others are not. Thus, whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do or do not meet the death that is the just retribution for their treachery is of relative importance, once the plot to which they are instrumental has been discovered and neutralized; in contrast, whether Hamlet does or does not kill Claudius when he discovers him at prayer is crucial to the development of the play. In *Last Action Hero* (1993), the young protagonist is well aware of the concept of *nexus event*, as during a boring — to him — school projection of Olivier's *Hamlet* he chooses precisely that

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<sup>330</sup> Basing himself on the analysis of the Burgess Shale, Gould maintained that, were we to rewind the tape of evolution, life on the planet would most probably not look exactly as it does now, as evolution does not necessarily proceeds linearly from a simpler to a more complex variety of forms. See John Beatty, 'Replaying Life's Tape', paper originally delivered at the 2002 Philosophy of Science Association meetings, <<http://www.philosophy.ubc.ca/faculty/beatty/BeattyReplay0506.pdf>> [accessed 17 September 2008]. See also Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: Norton, 1989).

<sup>331</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York; London: Penguin, 1986; first published 1985).

moment to give to the action a twist suiting his taste for adventure and, philologically, more faithful than Shakespeare to the Ur-text by Saxo Grammaticus, which featured a determinate, ruthlessly vengeful Hamlet:<sup>332</sup>

OLIVIER'S HAMLET: Now he's praying, and now I'll do it... [*Hamlet raises his sword aloft; imminent on-screen violence catches Danny attention. Hamlet pauses; a close-up of Danny shows the boy confused, frustrated.*]

HAMLET: And now I'll do't. And so 'a goes to heaven....

DANNY: Don't talk, just do it! [*Camera zooms in on Danny's face, into his unbelieving eye; another camera cut takes us back to a black-and-white film stock, but the film is no longer Olivier's Hamlet. Camera pans a tensed, heavily muscled left arm.*]

JACK SLATER [Arnold Schwarzenegger as Slater/Hamlet]: Hey, Claudius. You kilt my foddah.

ANNOUNCER'S DEEP-BASS VOICE-OVER: Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. [*Slater/Hamlet grabs the actor playing Claudius.*]

SLATER/HAMLET: Big mistake. [*He throws Claudius out one of Elsinore's large, stained-glass windows to his death.*]<sup>333</sup>

From that decisive moment onward, the tormented, irresolute Prince is transmogrified into a laconic, gun-toting avenger who disposes of the corrupt court of Elsinore — castle included — in a crescendo of carnage and destruction.

In structuralist terms, CT assumes that the *fabula* is not different from that of official historiography and has always been there for those who were skilful and honest enough to tell it correctly; it is the *story* that has been corrupted by distortions and omissions. A similar device is present in the plot of many a narrative — fantastic and not — positing the existence of a palimpsest, a hidden layer of meaning behind the surface of the events: what is Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898) but the description of an interplanetary conspiracy that had been brooding across time and space, at the expense of the unsuspecting human race?

No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. [...] No one gave a thought to the older worlds of space as sources of human danger, or thought of them only to

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<sup>332</sup> *Last Action Hero*. Dir. John McTiernan. Columbia Pictures. 1993. The film is also said to have foreshadowed the demise of postmodernism by marking the mass culture appropriation of the typically postmodern devices of 'self-reference, ironic satire, and playing with multiple levels of reality'. Andrew Hoberek, 'Introduction: After Postmodernism', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53.3 (Fall 2007), 233-247 (p. 233).

<sup>333</sup> Eric S. Mallin, "'You kilt my foddah"; or, Arnold, Prince of Denmark', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 50.2 (Summer 1999), 127-151 (p. 128).

dismiss the idea of life upon them as impossible or improbable. [...] Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. And early in the twentieth century came the great disillusionment.

[...]

The Martians seem to have calculated their descent with amazing subtlety [...] and to have carried out their preparations with a well-nigh perfect unanimity. Had our instruments permitted it, we might have seen the gathering trouble far back in the nineteenth century. [...] All that time the Martians must have been getting ready.<sup>334</sup>

SF lends itself particularly well to the construction of plots (in the telling ambiguity of the word) based on the premise that out there, literally beyond our reach, something wicked is getting ready to come our way — or has been here for a long time already, unbeknownst to us. Such is the case, to quote another example, in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1954), in which demon-shaped aliens have secretly followed humankind's progress toward the goal of integration — or, rather, dissolution — into a superior cosmic entity;<sup>335</sup> or with Poul Anderson's *Time Patrol* series, in which time travel is used to normalize history and prevent its accidental or unauthorized alteration, thus ensuring the future advent of a more evolved race, the Danellians. And is Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy not the chronicle of another benign conspiracy, once again concerned with controlling history and averting the threat looming upon humanity should the chaos of the unforeseen spread all over the galaxy? Judging from textual production alone, however, one would probably be bound to conclude that there are more conspiracies between heaven and earth than those coming from the stars — especially since no one and nothing has come from those quarters to begin with. Thus, conspiracies involving secrets sects, ruthless corporations, and devious governmental agencies are more popular these days than are those spun by lurking aliens, waiting for the right time to take over the earth.

Which goes to show that utopian/dystopian extrapolation is not the only literature to age inexorably and become, retrospectively, a putative form of AH. Indeed, all the *nova* of SF undergo a similar destiny, sooner or later — as do all innovations, literary and not. A recent example is cyberpunk, once the newest wave of SF, now

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<sup>334</sup> H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (New York: Pocket, 1988; first published 1898), pp. 11-13.

<sup>335</sup> Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End* (London: Pan, 1990; first published 1954).

largely commodified as a result of its most distinguished practitioners — such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling — shedding the robes of the Young Turks of SF and turning toward mainstream, as is bound to happen with any successful literary innovators. Even more decisive, however, has been the shift in reality itself, which has seen the introduction, if not in the extreme forms of cyberpunk narratives, of many key innovations they anticipated.

Genetic manipulation is by now a mature technology with widespread applications, from the cure of hereditary diseases to the enhancement of the very food we eat. Worldwide instant communication is part of everyday life, and virtual reality a common feature in computer games. Granted, no machine has yet passed the Turing test,<sup>336</sup> and if both the Hal9000 sentient computer of Stanley Kubrik's 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the Artificial Intelligence simulation of a literature student in Richard Powers' novel *Galatea 2.2* (1995) are still a long way to come, so much so are the man-machine hybrids, migrant identities, and memory implants of cyberpunk; but many features of the subgenre are no longer perceived as nearly as innovative as they were when they were first presented.

Ironically, this is also what happened to the technological paraphernalia of traditional SF, with its 'shopworn formula of robots, spaceships, [...] atomic energy',<sup>337</sup> and its daring futuristic design. That slow but relentless shift from cutting edge to nostalgia was brilliantly captured in the short story — and cyberpunk manifesto — 'The Gernsback Continuum'.<sup>338</sup> All that remains of that 'lost future' is the image

of a shadowy America-that-wasn't, of Coca-Cola plants like beached submarines, and fifth-run movie houses like the temples of some lost sect that had worshiped blue mirrors and geometry. [It

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<sup>336</sup> In the original test — different versions of which have been devised, though all based on the attempt to replicate human intelligence artificially — a human judge asks from a remote location a series of questions to both a human and a machine, which the questioner has to tell from one another, thus testing the ability by the computer to imitate natural language. For a seminal discussion of the issue, see A. M. Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', in Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett, eds, *The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 53-67; first published 1950.

<sup>337</sup> Bruce Sterling, 'Preface' to William Gibson, *Burning Chrome* (New York: Ace, 1987; first published 1986), pp. ix-xii (p. xi).

<sup>338</sup> William Gibson, 'The Gernsback Continuum', in *Burning Chrome*, pp. 23-35.

was as if they had] put Ming the Merciless in charge of designing California gas stations. [...] Lots of them featured superfluous central towers ringed with those strange radiator flanges that were a signature motif of the style, and made them look as though they might generate potent bursts of raw technological enthusiasm, if you could only find the switch that turned them on.<sup>339</sup>

In a vision redolent of mystical literature, this lost future — by now, an alternate past — takes on substance before the eyes of a Pilgrim riding in his rented car through the stations of the cross of Failed Progress.<sup>340</sup>

I looked behind me and saw the city. [...] Spire stood on spire in gleaming zigurat steps that climbed to a central golden temple tower ringed with the crazy radiator flanges of the Mongo gas stations. You could hide the Empire State Building in the smallest of those towers. Roads of crystal soared between the spires, crossed and recrossed by smooth silver shapes like beads of running mercury. The air was thick with ships.<sup>341</sup>

Even more disconcerting are ‘the children of [the] ’80-that-wasn’t, [the] Heirs to the Dream’:

They were white, blond, and they probably had blue eyes. [...] They were both in white: loose clothing, bare legs, spotless white sun shoes. [...] They were smug, happy, and utterly content with themselves and their world. And in the Dream, it was *their* world. [...] It had all the sinister fruitiness of Hitler Youth Propaganda.<sup>342</sup>

Sterling, that other ‘harbinger of better things to come’ for SF — which ‘in the late Seventies was confused, self-involved, and stale’ — wrote a self-celebratory Preface to Gibson’s anthology, in which he saluted the New Wave that was ‘helping to wake the genre from its dogmatic slumbers’, thus recovering its fundamental subversiveness:

If poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, science-fiction writers are its court jesters. We are Wise Fools who can leap, caper, utter prophecies, and scratch ourselves in public. We can play with Big ideas because the garish motley of our pulp origins makes us seem harmless.<sup>343</sup>

The task of the self-appointed jesters of cyberpunk was precisely that of exposing the nudity of their forefathers, once the technological robes they had donned had faded away: ‘It was all a stage set, a series of elaborate props for playing at living in the future.’<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Gibson, p. 27.

<sup>340</sup> The protagonist himself refers to his trip as ‘the stations of [a] convoluted socioarchitectural cross’ (p. 27).

<sup>341</sup> Gibson, p. 31.

<sup>342</sup> Gibson, pp. 32-33.

<sup>343</sup> Sterling, ‘Preface’ to Gibson, *Burning Chrome*, p. ix.

<sup>344</sup> Gibson, p. 25.

The painful truth is that of the glorious future heralded by the SF of yore little more is left than its preposterous translation into the ‘raygun Gothic’ architecture of Gibson’s story:

The movie marquees ribbed to radiate some mysterious energy, the dime stores faced with fluted aluminium, the chrome-tube chairs gathering dust in the lobbies of transient hotels. [...] Segments of a dreamworld, abandoned in the uncaring present.<sup>345</sup>

The same dreamworld returns in the shape of the ‘semiotic ghosts’ haunting the protagonist, ‘ephemeral stuff extruded by the collective American subconscious of the Thirties’.<sup>346</sup> Ontologically, these manifestations could perfectly well be explained away as mere hallucinations prompted by the overexcited imagination of a photographer touring California and taking pictures of the crumbling futuristic architecture from the near past — and by the ‘diet pill’ he has taken. In fact, the story could be termed *meta-SF* in that it never postulates, for example, the actuality of the grandiose, boomerang-shaped, twelve-engined airliner, so huge as to be unairworthy, yet so real before the protagonist’s eye that he ‘could count the rivets in its dull silver skin, and hear — maybe — the echo of jazz’.<sup>347</sup>

The even more ambitious dream of space exploration has been shattered as well, in the still unconquerable immensity of interstellar distance, and in the prohibitive costs and risks of manned missions, even within the solar system: after the Columbia disaster, the promise of space travel for the masses built into the Shuttle project has been tragically told the lie, and space tourism limited to a costly fancy for bored millionaires; the hopes of communication with alien sentient beings — bug-eyed and not — are no longer entrusted to the daring space travellers of SF but, much more modestly, to the engraved plaques attached to the Pioneer probes, luckily outliving their original missions and trespassing the borders of the solar system. Thus, all that is left for the collective unconscious to cherish are the black-and-white images of the moon landing, by now as

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<sup>345</sup> Gibson, pp. 24-25.

<sup>346</sup> Gibson, pp. 30 and 26, respectively.

<sup>347</sup> Gibson, p. 28.

old and static-ridden as the eroded newsreels that fascinate Gibson's protagonist with their long-abandoned promises of 'A Flying Car in Your Future'.<sup>348</sup>

But partial fulfilment of a great hope can be no less disappointing than its betrayal. If the time was then considered ripe for 'Getting out of the Gernsback Continuum', now, a couple of decades after what constituted 'an economical commentary on the history of science fiction' but also expressed — if tongue-in-cheek — 'the genre's sense of shame at his family origins' in pulp magazines, it may be time to break loose from the Gibson Continuum as one more 'future perfect that never was'.<sup>349</sup> In this respect, AH might turn out to be more lasting than other forms of SF, since it is much less dependent on dazzling new technology and special effects for its impact. Indeed, considering *all* unfulfilled prophecies as retrospective forms of AH could grant them a renewed lease on life, as is the antiquary experience of the remnants of futuristic architecture by Gibson's protagonist: 'Think of it [...] as *a kind of alternate America: a 1980 that never happened*. An architecture of broken dreams.'<sup>350</sup>

The protagonist finds no better confidant for his hallucinations than a cynical conspiracy theory expert, and the latter no better antidote to suggest than watching 'lots of television, particularly game shows and soaps', as if the massified simulacra of reality could counter their nostalgic counterparts, the 'spray-paint pulp utopias' from the covers of old SF magazines.<sup>351</sup> But it is at the end of the story, in an anticlimactic dialogue with a newsagent, that reality and dream, utopia and dystopia irretrievably swap roles and make any attempt at a unified metaphysics and ethics pointless:

'Hell of a world we live in, huh?' [...] I nodded, fishing in my jeans for change, anxious to find a park bench where I could submerge myself in hard evidence of the human *near-dystopia* we live in. 'But it could be worse, huh?'  
'That's right,' I said, 'or even worse, it could be perfect.'<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Gibson, p. 24.

<sup>349</sup> Andrew Ross, 'Getting out of the Gernsback Continuum', *Critical Inquiry*, 17.2 (Winter 1991), 411-433 (pp. 411-412).

<sup>350</sup> Gibson, p. 27; emphasis added.

<sup>351</sup> Gibson, p. 33 and p. 25, respectively.

<sup>352</sup> Gibson, p. 35; emphasis added.

Thus, Gibson's story does not only settle the account with its ancestors from the Golden Age of SF pulp magazines; it positions itself at the intersection of diverse generic modes and defies classification by blending in a unique form aesthetic and theoretic reflections on architecture, media and pop culture, as well as on a lost utopian dream and its nightmarish counterpart, in a continual, unsettling reversal of perspective that never commits itself completely to the alternative reality but adds up to a compendium of postmodernist poetics: significantly, Jameson saluted cyberpunk as 'the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself'.<sup>353</sup>

AH is definitely postmodern in that it reflects a general shift in fiction from epistemological to ontological concerns. Unlike conspiracy theory,

allohistory [...] is not interested in exploring the knowability of recorded events, and determinedly does split off language from received historiographic realities. It is more concerned with the imaginative, often whimsical, creation of unattested outcomes for potentialities: allohistory creates long, full lives for stillborn infants and early deaths for venerable patriarchs.<sup>354</sup>

In other words:

The kind of perspectivism that allowed the modernist to get a better bearing on the meaning of a complex but nevertheless singular reality [has been abandoned for] the foregrounding of questions as to how radically different realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate. The boundary between fiction and science fiction has, as a consequence, effectively dissolved.<sup>355</sup>

Paradoxically, the suspension of disbelief required of readers of alternate history is further-reaching than that which is expected of readers of even the most daring science-fiction or *fairy stories*,<sup>356</sup> since in the latter case the conventions of the genre are such that readers are willing to accept any sort of deviation from actuality, whereas alternate history, regardless of its pursuit of (maximal) verisimilitude, is flatly contradicted by

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<sup>353</sup> Jameson, p. 419 Note 1.

<sup>354</sup> Harry Walsh, 'The Microcosmography of Russian Cultural Myths in Vladimir Sharov's Allohistorical Novels', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 46.3 (Autumn 2002), 565-585 (pp. 565-566).

<sup>355</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 41.

<sup>356</sup> Tolkien's definition of Fantasy. See 'On Fairy-Stories', in J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 109-161.

historical records. At its postmodern utmost, AH appears to be fundamentally anti-utopian in its denial of a real alternative to the present, which is replaced by a playful, non-committal version of the past. As Harvey laments:

The most startling fact about postmodernism [appears to be] its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic [nature] of modernity. [...] Postmodernism [...] does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the 'eternal and immutable' elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is.<sup>357</sup>

Alkon identifies two strands of AH. One is the 'classical mode', in which questions of causation and consequences are foregrounded by explicitly discussing how the alternate world came about and/or what makes it different from ours; the other, 'which might well be termed postmodern alternate history, inclines toward the techniques of parallel history, [thus] contributing more to the disease of postmodernism than to its cure'. AH is therefore ambivalent:

It may serve to provide enhanced awareness of what the past was like and of our relationships to it as well as to our present historical moment. Or else, when inclining toward parallel history, alternate history may serve the more postmodern purpose of blunting awareness of actual historicity and of chronological distinctions to provide instead what Jameson calls pseudohistorical depth achieved by deliberate recourse to past styles of writing: aesthetic colonization of the past, not authentic engagement with it.<sup>358</sup>

Classical, 'pure' AH — including Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, and Harris' *Fatherland* — does not indulge in 'postmodern amnesia, chronological confusion, or mere imitation of dead styles to provide a nostalgic experience of pseudohistory'; it pushes readers 'toward rather than away from an encounter with actual history in the form of its documentary evidence, and toward enhanced appreciation of their own present as a historical moment'. In contrast,

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<sup>357</sup> Harvey, p. 44.

<sup>358</sup> Paul J. Alkon, 'Alternate History and Postmodern Temporality', in *Time, Literature and the Arts: Essays in Honor of Samuel L. Macey*, ed. by Thomas R. Cleary (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1994), pp. 65-85 (pp. 83-84).

‘postmodern’ AH — such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *steampunk*<sup>359</sup> novel *The Difference Engine* (1991) and, to some extent, Turtledove’s *The Guns of the South* — ‘reduce historical differences to the status of superficial idiosyncrasies of speech, dress, and decor. The alternate past is merely a fun-house mirror reflection of our present and vice-versa. [...] The net effect is to replace diachrony with synchrony. Everything seems to coexist.’<sup>360</sup> Indeed, in *The Difference Engine* Victorianism is treated ‘not as a historical given but as a textual construct open to manipulation and modification’.<sup>361</sup>

*The Difference Engine* is thus mainly parallel history very much of a piece with postmodern modes of abolishing historicity by denying essential differences between chronologically disparate times while also deflecting attention from questions about the very possibility of such differences at any but the most superficial level.<sup>362</sup>

Severe as it may be as regards the case in point, Alkon’s judgement does capture a crucial aspect of the postmodern *play* with the past as opposed to *purpose, chance* instead of *design, anarchy over hierarchy*, the apparently random coexistence of diverse

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<sup>359</sup> The term is generally thought to have been coined by author K. W. Jeter in a letter published in the April 1987 issue of *Locus*. Steampunk is akin to AH in that it is generally set in an alternate Victorian society with advanced technology, usually with steam instead of electricity as the main power source: hence the ‘steam’ prefixed to ‘punk’, with the latter probably referring to the *cyberpunk* SF that was in fashion at the time. However, more often than not spurious, more typically postmodern elements such as meta-literary reference and the supernatural are introduced in the narrative, whereas the analysis of how the alternate timeline came about is neglected. See Jean-Jacques Girardot and Fabrice Méreste, ‘Le Steampunk: une machine littéraire à recycler le passé’, *Cycnos*, 22.1 <<http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/document.html?id=472>> [accessed 27 November 2007]. The article also provides a ‘recipe’ for *steampunk*: ‘Un soupçon d’intrigue policière, une resucée de vampirisme, deux brins d’hommes politiques, une once de démesure, une pincée de héros d’antan, un doigt de fantastique, un temps d’uchronie, trois grains de folie, quelques références aux littérateurs anciens, une bonne dose d’épisodes rocambolesques dans un Londres revisité, humour et mystère à volonté, sans oublier savants fous, machines infernales et monstres en tous genres constituant l’indispensable excipient q.s.p.’

<sup>360</sup> Alkon, pp. 78-80. Gibson and Sterling’s novel depicts an alternate Victorian England, much more technologically advanced than its actual counterpart thanks to Charles Babbage’s ‘difference engine’, a computing machine whose feasibility according to the original blueprints has been demonstrated by the replica completed in 1991 for the inventor’s bicentennial, now on show at the London Science Museum. See London Science Museum, ‘Babbage’ <<http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/onlinestuff/stories/babbage.aspx>> [accessed 03 December 2007].

<sup>361</sup> Steffen Hantke, ‘Difference Engines and Other Infernal Devices: History According to Steampunk’, *Extrapolation*, 40.3 (Fall 1999), 244-254 (p. 248). This typically postmodern ‘sense of ambiguity about the ontological status of the fictional universe’ is shared by other steampunk narratives (Hantke, p. 250).

<sup>362</sup> Alkon, p. 81.

cultural modes pertaining to different periods and places.<sup>363</sup> But it is open to debate whether AH constitutes a possible cure for the postmodern ‘loss of historicity’ — the ‘exasperating condition [of] historical deafness’ — or, rather, it produces ‘a series of spasmodic and intermittent, but desperate attempts at recuperation, [...] to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place’.<sup>364</sup>

The ontological divide posited by Alkon — between escapist parallel worlds stories and the purer form of AH, enhancing rather than lowering the consciousness of historical change, of its causation and consequences — might be replicated, to some extent, in Jameson’s analysis. Much like postmodernist theory itself, AH at its best would thus represent an ‘unforeseeable return of narrative as the narrative of the end of [unique] narratives, [the] return of history in the midst of the prognosis of the demise of historical telos’<sup>365</sup> — although admittedly AH and historical teleology do make strange bedfellows. By contrast, a more definite postmodern, noncommittal version of AH would be represented by *nexus stories*,<sup>366</sup> with their interest ‘for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same’.<sup>367</sup> However, there would remain in need of explanation why ‘much alternate history is still produced by authors of military science fiction [those who tend to specialize in *nexus stories*, which usually focus on military history] — writers whose response to the word “postmodern” is a growl’.<sup>368</sup>

As is often the case, the truth might be located somewhere in between. If it possesses sufficient rigour in the historical analysis and the aesthetic ability to summon

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<sup>363</sup> Harvey, p. 43. For a well-known juxtaposition of the respective features of modernism and postmodernism, see Ihab Hassan, ‘The Culture of Postmodernism’, *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 2.3 (1985), 119-131 (pp. 123-124).

<sup>364</sup> Jameson, ‘Introduction’, pp. ix-xi.

<sup>365</sup> Jameson, p. xii.

<sup>366</sup> ‘The nexus story is an alternate history that focuses on [a *nexus event*, i.e.,] a crucial point in history, such as a battle or assassination, in which something happens that changes the outcome from the one we know today’, without expanding on the long-term consequences of the alteration. Hellekson, 2000, p. 252.

<sup>367</sup> Jameson, p. ix.

<sup>368</sup> Feeley.

up the presence of the alternative past, AH could convey ‘the feel of the real past better than any of the “facts” themselves’; thus, it could transcend ‘postmodern fantastic historiography’ with its ‘wild imaginary genealogies and novels that shuffle historical figures and names like so many cards from a finite deck’, just ‘a comic-book juxtaposition, [...] a schoolboy exercise in which all kinds of disparate materials are put together in new ways’.

Agency here steps out of the historical record itself into the process of devising it; and new multiple or alternate strings of events rattle the bars of the national tradition and the history manuals whose very constraints and necessities their parodic force indicts.<sup>369</sup>

Regrettably, Jameson overlooks the possibility that an alternative version of the past be presented not as parody or pastiche but as fictional fact, thus constructing an alternate ontology in its own right: the only ‘alternate histories’ he takes into consideration are such only in an epistemic sense, as they concern ‘silenced groups, workers, women, minorities whose scanty records have been systematically burned or expunged out of everything but the police archives’.<sup>370</sup> What he perceives is ‘a kind of reality pluralism — a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems’, which may fairly describe some postmodern literary experiments but does not do justice to the ontological coherence of most AH — as much as the latter does indulge, from time to time, in forms of minor or more serious anachronism.<sup>371</sup> Moreover, the overall postmodernist approach to history may not be nearly as vain as Jameson would have it. The ‘historiographic metafiction’ that Hutcheon identifies as the default discursive mode of postmodernism in matters historical does problematize, but does not negate the notion of a collective past:

*Pace* the opponents of postmodernism, there is no lack of concern for history or any radical relativism or subjectivism [...]. Instead there is a view of the past, both recent and remote, that takes the present powers and limitations of the writing of that past into account. And the result is often a certain avowed provisionality and irony.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Jameson, pp. 367-370.

<sup>370</sup> Jameson, p. 367.

<sup>371</sup> Jameson, p. 372.

<sup>372</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London; New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 90.

A novel like E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), indicted by Jameson as an example of the disappearance of the historical referent in postmodernism, 'with its Morgans and Fords, its Houdinis and Thaws and Whites' reduced to newspaper figures 'pasted onto a painted backdrop',<sup>373</sup> may yet convey, for all its 'tampering with the "facts" of received history, [...] an accurate evocation of a particular period of early-twentieth-century American capitalism, with due representation from all classes involved [...]: the historical referent is very present — and in spades.'<sup>374</sup> After all, a troubled historical consciousness is better than no consciousness at all.

This quest for the definition of AH has proceeded more by subtraction and juxtaposition than by inclusion, and has tried to explain what AH is *not* by comparing it with cognate texts, rather than producing a list of its features. If not a definitive classification, hopefully the effort will have produced a provisional map for the exploration of this intriguing and rapidly expanding region which, when all is considered and with every proviso that it is prudent to adopt, still belongs to the realm of SF; however, as with all the best specimen of every popular genre, some texts do deserve their admission to the better quarters of mainstream literature.

Literary evolution follows its mysterious ways, with the apparently whimsical rise, fall, and resurgence of genres in accordance with variations in taste, modes of production and circulation of texts, and other factors. If even in biological evolution the old assumption that *natura non facit saltus* has been questioned, this 'hallowed maxim' is all the more dubious in literature, where derivation from previous forms can be particularly difficult to demonstrate but for the most recent stages, due to the scarcity of fossils.<sup>375</sup> Linguistic creativity for aesthetic ends may well be as old as human language itself, but written records are available only for a limited, recent part of its trajectory —

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<sup>373</sup> Jameson, p. 369.

<sup>374</sup> Hutcheon, p. 89.

<sup>375</sup> Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, 'Review: *How the Mule Got Its Tale*: Moretti's Darwinian Bricolage', *Diacritics*, 29.2 (Summer 1999), 18-40 (p. 35).

which is also true of history, another recording of human activity indissolubly linked to narrativity in general and AH in particular.

Be this as it may, ‘one of the basic differences between biological and cultural evolution is that the latter can do something the former is incapable of: retrieve the losers’. Thus the early French examples of AH, possibly the victims of the emergence of the robust, pervasive strain of popular SF written by the likes of Verne, have ‘reappeared in the flourishing SF subgenre of Alternate History’.<sup>376</sup> Which may be a poor *a posteriori* rationalization of the phenomenon; but, after all, ‘a theory is nothing but the high point in the career of a metaphor’.<sup>377</sup>

Turning back to the origins may offer some revelatory insight. The *uchronia* that now comprehensively applies to all histories set outside our continuum was coined for the AH subgenre in its infancy:

L'écrivain compose une *uchronie*, utopie des temps passés. Il écrit l'histoire, non telle qu'elle fut, mais telle qu'elle aurait pu être, à ce qu'il croit, et il nous avertit ni des erreurs volontaires, ni de son but.<sup>378</sup>

Here is AH in a nutshell: the story does not correspond to facts, but never explicitly declares its fictionality; it is about history, but a history that never came about, although it could have. As is often the case with those who perceive themselves as the founders of a new province of writing, Renouvier felt both entitled and bound to write down its fundamental laws. And, as with the *suspension of disbelief* which AH shares with all fiction, centuries of critical debate and literary theory have hardly produced a better definition: ‘Il était difficile de faire mieux que d'énoncer en termes généraux la pensée neuve et le genre insolite.’<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Winthrop-Young, 1999, p. 34.

<sup>377</sup> Winthrop-Young, 1999, p. 38.

<sup>378</sup> Renouvier, p. 10.

<sup>379</sup> Renouvier, p. 19.

## 2. Scraps of a Tainted Sky: Thousand Year Reichs that Never Came to Pass

I am a mask, concealing the real. Behind me, hidden, actuality goes on, safe from prying eyes.  
(Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*)

WWII is one of the favourite subjects of AH,<sup>380</sup> for its undisputable importance, for the moral alternatives it presents, and, perhaps, for more prosaic reasons:

Victorious Confederacies and triumphant Hitlers have been a staple of alternate history. Such scenarios are feasible because even postmodern Americans usually know at least something about the Civil War and World War II.<sup>381</sup>

Thus, ‘the theme of Nazi victory has almost become for Anglo-American writers what Napoleon has been to the French’.<sup>382</sup>

However, the figure of Hitler remains looming in the background of the texts analyzed in this study, concerned as they are with the broader historical picture and the accidents in the lives of relatively unimportant individuals rather than Great Men. More generally, the treatment of the Fuehrer in fiction still seems to defy sober assessment, as if coming to terms with such a disconcerting personage were beyond the powers of the imagination, especially in Germany, where the *damnatio memoriae* punishing Nazism stands in the way of a serene, objective representation of the Evil still haunting the national consciousness. Every anniversary that painfully reminds the country of its shameful past becomes the occasion for ‘a new round of soul-searching’,<sup>383</sup> as did a recent film, Oliver Hirschbiegel’s *Der Untergang* [Downfall],<sup>384</sup> featuring a magnificent Bruno Ganz purportedly depicting Hitler in his last days as an all too human figure.<sup>385</sup> On the other hand, his memory is dangerously seducing for a host of nostalgic or new

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<sup>380</sup> See, for example, the anthology *Hitler Victorious: Eleven Stories of the German Victory in World War II*, ed. by Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg (New York: Garland, 1986).

<sup>381</sup> Alkon, p. 70.

<sup>382</sup> Collins, p. 225.

<sup>383</sup> See Nicholas Kulish, ‘Germany Confronts Holocaust Legacy Anew’, *New York Times*, 29 January 2008.

<sup>384</sup> Constantin Film Produktion. 2005.

<sup>385</sup> David Denby, ‘Back in the Bunker’, *New Yorker*, 14 February 2005.

admirers practicing a personality cult facilitated by the vast circulation of Nazi memorabilia, as is brilliantly described in DeLillo's essay 'Silhouette City'.<sup>386</sup>

By contrast, in DeLillo's *White Noise* the two professors, specialized in the improbable pop culture subjects of 'Hitler Studies' and 'Elvis Studies', engage in an improvised antiphonal lecture that soon degenerates in a duel-like exchange — a satire of academic vanity — wherein they show off their erudition, which consists chiefly of juxtaposed trivia and petty incidents from the lives of the two public figures, who have undergone a similar process of banalization:

I put on my dark glasses, composed my face and walked into the room. [...] I stood against the wall, attempting to loom, my arms folded under the black gown.

Murray was in the midst of a thoughtful monologue.

'Did his mother know that Elvis would die young? She talked about assassins. She talked about the life. The life of a star of this type and magnitude. [...]

'Hitler adored his mother,' I said.

A surge of attention, unspoken, identifiable only in a certain convergence of stillness, an inward tensing. Murray kept moving, of course, but a bit more deliberately, picking his way between the chairs, the people seated on the floor. I stood against the wall, arms folded.

'Elvis and Gladys liked to nuzzle and pet,' he said. 'They slept in the same bed until he began to approach physical maturity. They talked baby talk to each other all the time.'

'Hitler was a lazy kid. His report card was full of unsatisfactorys. But Klara loved him, spoiled him, gave him the attention his father failed to give him. She was a quiet woman, modest and religious, and a good cook and housekeeper.'

'Gladys walked Elvis to school and back every day. She defended him in little street rumbles, lashed out at any kid who tried to bully him.'

'Hitler fantasized. He took piano lessons, made sketches of museums and villas. He sat around the house a lot. Klara tolerated this. He was the first of her children to survive infancy. Three others had died.'

'Elvis confided in Gladys. He brought his girlfriends around to meet her.'

'Hitler wrote a poem to his mother. His mother and his niece were the women with the greatest hold on his mind.'

'When Elvis went into the army, Gladys became ill and depressed. She sensed something, maybe as much about herself as about him. Her psychic apparatus was flashing all the wrong signals. Foreboding and gloom.'

'There's not much doubt that Hitler was what we call a mama's boy.'

[...] Then, on an impulse, I abandoned my stance at the wall and began to pace the room like Murray, occasionally pausing to gesture, to listen, to gaze out a window or up at the ceiling.

'Elvis could hardly bear to let Gladys out of his sight when her condition grew worse. He kept a vigil at the hospital.'

'When his mother became severely ill, Hitler put a bed in the kitchen to be closer to her. He cooked and cleaned.'

'Elvis fell apart with grief when Gladys died. He fondled and petted her in the casket. He talked baby talk to her until she was in the ground.'

'Klara's funeral cost three hundred and seventy kronen. Hitler wept at the grave and fell into a period of depression and self-pity. He felt an intense loneliness. He'd lost not only his beloved mother but also his sense of home and hearth.'

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<sup>386</sup> Don DeLillo, 'Silhouette City: Hitler, Manson and the Millennium', in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, ed. by Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin, 1998), pp. 344-352. First published in *Dimensions*, 4.3 (1989), 29-34.

‘It seems fairly certain that Gladys’s death caused a fundamental shift at the center of the King’s world view. She’d been his anchor, his sense of security. He began to withdraw from the real world, to enter the state of his own dying.’

‘For the rest of his life, Hitler could not bear to be anywhere near Christmas decorations because his mother had died near a Christmas tree.’

[...]

Murray and I passed each other near the center of the room, almost colliding. [We] circled each other and headed off in opposite directions, avoiding an exchange of looks.<sup>387</sup>

Remarkably, even the Anglo-Saxon authors of some of the most celebrated alternate histories of WWII have resisted the temptation to linger on the portrait of the absolute protagonist of that tragedy: in *The Man in the High Castle*, Dick refers to him peripherally by depicting a Nazi Germany enmeshed in a struggle for the succession to a by now decrepit Fuehrer; Harris, on the other hand, enlarges in *Fatherland* on the dynamics of the lower echelons of Nazi hierarchy; in *TPAA*, Roth has one of Hitler’s cronies, Von Ribbentrop, pay an official visit to America. It is as though all of them resisted the commodification of Hitler, his transformation into a pop icon alongside other dead celebrities, possibly the object of cult for fanatics sighting him at various spots or quietly, grimly awaiting his return while collecting memorabilia — if not actively preparing it through extremist activities.

The cumbersome legacy of the War is still troubling German consciousness, as is shown by recurrent controversies like the one sparked by the publication of Günter Grass’s autobiography, in which he confesses to having served in the *Waffen-SS*.<sup>388</sup> However, the passing of time, if it does not automatically facilitate the overcoming of national trauma, inevitably causes memories to fade, with the emergence of generations who perceive WWII as part of a distant past they do not feel personally involved with, let alone responsible for. Which can originate another set of problems altogether, as is shown by the introduction in German schools of a comics strip version of the Holocaust.<sup>389</sup> One might argue that this somehow edulcorates the horror by downgrading

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<sup>387</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 70-72.

<sup>388</sup> Günter Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* [Peeling the Onion] (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006).

<sup>389</sup> Eric Heuvel, Ruud van der Rol, and Lies Schippers, *Die Suche* [The Search] (Amsterdam: Anne Frank House, 2007). See also ‘Nelle scuole tedesche l’Olocausto a fumetti’, <<http://www.repubblica.it/2006/05/gallerie/scuola/fumetti-olocausto/1.html>> [accessed 9 February 2008].

it to a bedtime story told by a wise grandma, reporting a bowdlerized version of Hitler's speeches. In the process the banality of evil does not emerge, while the rhetorical appeal that such hateful propaganda must have exerted is lost: this might be one of those cases in which paraphrase is indeed heretical.<sup>390</sup> Perhaps it is precisely the fear that the appeal be persistent, that the message might not fall on deaf ears, that motivates the attempt to defuse it by stripping it of all its paraphernalia: 'torchlight parades, tributes to the martyred dead, halls hung with mortuary wreaths, enormous rallies built upon dramatic displays of sound and light'.<sup>391</sup>

At any rate, the Hitler taboo appears to be slowly crumbling away, not only in the powerful impersonation by an astonishingly resembling Bruno Ganz in *The Downfall* but also in another recent German movie, Dani Levy's *Mein Führer: Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* [The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler] (2007), in which the Fuehrer becomes the subject of comedy, always a sign of the overcoming of historical trauma, as happened for the Korean war with Robert Altman's *A\*S\*H\** (1970).<sup>392</sup> Yet Roth and the other abovementioned authors stop short of the Conradian kernel of that tale of horror, as if mystified by the haze surrounding it. By contrast, a recent Italian novel apparently relishes in the description of absolute evil.<sup>393</sup> Although the author denies that the book could somehow contribute to rejuvenating the Hitler myth, the incipit is involuntarily grotesque — even disrespectful, in the initial quote from Primo Levi.<sup>394</sup>

*Lambach (Austria), marzo 1897*

Confrontatevi con lui. Considerate se questo è un uomo.  
È scatenato nei cieli, immenso, invisibile, entra nel tempo e ne riesce, digrigna i denti giallastri, immensi, i suoi occhi di brace illuminano tutte le notti future.  
È il lupo della Fine, si chiama Fenrir.

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<sup>390</sup> 'The Heresy of Paraphrase' is the title of a chapter in Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947).

<sup>391</sup> DeLillo, 'Silhouette City', p. 348.

<sup>392</sup> Mark Landler, 'In Germany, a Hitler Comedy Goes Over With a Thud', *New York Times*, 11 January 2007.

<sup>393</sup> Giuseppe Genna, *Hitler* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008).

<sup>394</sup> 'Hitler: intervista a Giuseppe Genna', <<http://www.booksblog.it/post/2389/hitler-intervista-a-giuseppe-genna>> [accessed 9 February 2008].

Gli antichi nordici sapevano che un giorno avrebbe rotto il vincolo. Fu allevato nella terra dei giganti, fu fatto rinchiodare da Odino e serrati i suoi arti con una catena che i maghi prepararono con rumore del passo del gatto, barba di donna, radici di montagna, tendini d'orso, respiro di pesce, saliva di uccello – alla vista e al tatto sembrava un nastro di seta, ma in realtà nessuno avrebbe potuto spezzare quella catena. E in attesa della fine, il lupo Fenrir è rimasto recluso, a ululare, a sbavare, a tentare di spezzare il vincolo.

E ora è riuscito.

Da fuori del tempo cala nel tempo e nello spazio, percorre ciclopico i vasti cieli europei, annusa i confini e marca il territorio, urina piogge acide sulle frontiere della Germania, ulula e stride, stalattiti di ghiaccio pendono dal suo ventre unto, le zampe cavalcano l'etere, velocissimo, non sa nulla, ispeziona con le narici dilatate, è il mostro dell'avvenire, il portatore dell'apocalisse.

Apocalisse significa: rivelazione. Rivelerà a chi?

Gira a vortice, a spirale, sull'Europa pronta al disfacimento. Sulle case borghesi. Sui patriarchi che tengono alla propria onorabilità. Sulle mogli accantonate. Sui molti bambini cresciuti a bacchettate. Sulla natura iridescente del pianeta che si prepara al degrado.

Di tutto ciò, il lupo Fenrir non vede nulla: sono forme che ai suoi occhi accesi evaporano. Il tempo è una breve distrazione tutta umana.

Ed ecco che l'olfatto capta.

Intercetta l'odore ricercato. Ecco la traccia. Avverte la presenza della non-persona. A lui si legherà, perché entrambi sono niente, e cresceranno insieme, e il lupo Fenrir apprenderà dal non-umano, si riempirà, si gonfierà di liquami e tradimenti e orrori non suoi, scaturiti da quello zero che non è una persona, e l'odore di quella annusa nell'aria e dunque precipita. Verso l'Austria, a capofitto, lasciandosi cadere attraverso i gradi multicolori dell'arcobaleno, perforando l'aurora, l'alba, le fasi del tempo umano, le ore trascorse.

È qui.

Hannah Arendt famously contributed to dispelling the demonic aura that might be attached to the atrocious scale of Nazi crimes by exposing the meanness of their perpetrators:

When I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain'. Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*. [...] He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness — something by no means identical with stupidity — that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.<sup>395</sup>

Yet the fascination with the dark side of the human soul personified by the Fuehrer may still find a surrogate expression in musing with historical alternatives which, far from performing a cathartic or admonishing function, 'may secretly, or not so secretly, appeal to the inner Hitler who tempts us to chafe at the constraints of civilization and morality'.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Classics, 1992; first published 1963), pp. 287-288.

<sup>396</sup> Alkon, p. 71.

Authors are apparently aware of two opposite — but not totally unrelated — risks: on the one hand, the unwilling exaltation of a sinister figure, made larger by the sheer size of his crimes if not by his appeal to our worst selves; on the other hand, the *banalization of evil*, which can transform even the climactic movie scene of Hitler's realization of his *Downfall* in the Berlin bunker in a series of homemade spoofs featuring, in the role of the ranting loser, 'just about any hubristic entity that might come undone', from presidential candidates to computer game maniacs.<sup>397</sup> Which may speak volumes about the counterfeiting possibilities of modern technology — in this case, the quite simple superimposition of inconsistent subtitles to the original soundtrack — or the postmodern dissolution of historical consciousness; or, more reassuringly to some extent, the turn from tragedy to comedy or farce might be evidence that the wounds of the past have been completely healed by the inexorable action of time.

However, a smudge of the fascination with one of history's arch-villains might resurface in the first of only two extensive mentions of Hitler in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*.<sup>398</sup> The scene pictures him as the epitome of the evil that has spread over the earth, and now threatens to expand throughout the solar system as a consequence of the Nazi space programme:

Old Adolf, supposed to be in a sanitarium somewhere, living out his life of senile paresis. Syphilis of the brain, dating back to his poor days as a bum in Vienna. . . long black coat, dirty underwear, flophouses.

Obviously, it was God's sardonic vengeance, right out of some silent movie. That awful man struck down by an internal filth, the historic plague for man's wickedness.

And the horrible part was that the present-day German Empire was a product of that brain. First a political party, then a nation, then half the world. [...] The entire world knew it, and yet the Leader's gabble was still sacred, still Holy Writ. The views had infected a civilization by now, and, like evil spores, the blind blond Nazi queens were swishing out from Earth to the other planets, spreading the contamination.

What you get for incest: madness, blindness, death. (*MHC*, p. 36)

In other words:

'Tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely.

(*Hamlet*, I. 2. TLN 339-341)

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<sup>397</sup> Virginia Heffernan, 'The Hitler Meme', *New York Times Magazine*, 26 October 2008.

<sup>398</sup> Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (New York: Vintage, 1992; first published 1962).

Hereafter: *MHC*. Page numbers have been inserted parenthetically in the text.

The time is out of joint —also a novel by Dick<sup>399</sup> — and no Hamlet around to try to set it right.

### 2.1. Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

(I Corinthians 13. 12)

*MHC* is a SF novel critically acclaimed in its own right and generally acknowledged a prominent place in the history of AH. It is set in a counterhistorical US, defeated in WWII and split up in three — not by a capricious king between his daughters, but by the victorious Axis powers of Germany and Japan between themselves, leaving a powerless buffer zone in the middle, the Rocky Mountain States, and an unspecified South, with deep ties with the Reich and where racism reigns supreme (*MHC*, pp. 8-9).

Whereas the influence of Dick's novel on AH writers who came after him has been widely acknowledged — sometimes through references by the authors themselves — its alleged indebtedness to previous works has given rise to wide-ranging speculation, sometimes with thin evidence to support it. Thus, Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* may have been influential as far as the general AH theme is concerned, but hardly so as regards subject matter, since Moore's novel is about the Civil War;<sup>400</sup> conversely, the influence of the historical counterfactual 'If Hitler Had Won World War II', written by William S. Shirer at about the same time, is barely tenable for chronological reasons; on the other hand, the hypothesis of the inspiration for a first draft of *MHC* by an animated conversation with some fans is supported by documental evidence;<sup>401</sup> but when strong credit is given to the rumour, circulating in SF circles and reportedly coming 'from Dick's lips' — although never committed to paper — that he had recourse to the ancient

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<sup>399</sup> Philip K. Dick, *Time Out of Joint* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1959).

<sup>400</sup> McKnight, p. 62.

<sup>401</sup> Collins, pp. 207-209. See also William L. Shirer, 'If Hitler Had Won World War II', *Look*, 19 December 1961, pp. 26-36; 41-42; 44.

Chinese divination method of the *I Ching* while devising the plot of *MHC*, literary biography parts company with fact-checking and heads for those dangerous regions of anecdote which border on hagiography,<sup>402</sup> although the hypothesis in itself could be perfectly plausible with such an eccentric personage as Dick, fascinated by mysticism, gnosis, and artificially altered states of consciousness.

At any rate, it can be safely assumed that the texts which Dick himself acknowledged as sources did influence the novel, or, more limitedly, served as background documentation. Thus, in the initial 'Acknowledgements', the reference to the *I Ching* concerns only the edition used and quoted in the novel, whereas it is explicitly stated that Dick made 'much use' of historical sources about the Third Reich, such as Alan Bullock's *Hitler, a Study in Tyranny* (1953), Goebbels's diaries, and Shirer's classic *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.<sup>403</sup> The latter study in particular constituted a substantial but easily accessible account of the matter, although not exempt from criticism from academic quarters, possibly motivated in part by its enormous success and the journalistic background of the author, which may also have made him less wary of counterfactual speculation than was the average professional historian of the time.<sup>404</sup>

Thus, besides writing the aforementioned HC, Shirer included in his most famous work a counterfactual discussion of a Nazi invasion of Britain as well documented as the rest of the book, since it is based almost entirely on original materials from German and British archives.<sup>405</sup> Admittedly, reality most often thwarts the most carefully drawn and scrupulously executed plans; yet Shirer's counterfactual would pass the most severe plausibility tests. Indeed, Roberts and Ferguson's 'Hitler's England' reads much like an expanded and revised version of Shirer's antecedent; although failing

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<sup>402</sup> Collins, p. 223.

<sup>403</sup> William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (London: Book Club, 1968; first published 1960).

<sup>404</sup> For a survey of the diverse reactions to Shirer's work in the US and Germany, see Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, 'The Reception of William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* in the United States and West Germany, 1960-62', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29.1 (January 1994), 95-128.

<sup>405</sup> 'If the Invasion Had Succeeded', in Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, pp. 936-940.

to acknowledge Shirer's primogeniture explicitly, the two counterfactual historians do not manifest any belated resentment of the successful outsider, since his work is duly mentioned in the notes.<sup>406</sup>

Shirer's counterfactual scenario may have suggested to Dick the turning point in his alternative course of WWII, namely the German decision to concentrate on the annihilation of the British radar alert system and of the RAF rather than on carpet-bombing English cities as in actual history, which brought scarce or no strategic advantage — indeed, it strengthened the British resolve to carry on the fight.

Now Goering made the first of his two tactical errors. The skill of British Fighter Command in committing its planes to battle against vastly superior attacking forces was based on its shrewd use of radar. [...] Yet the attack on British radar stations which on August 12 had been so damaging had not been continued and on August 15, the day of his first major setback, Goering called them off entirely, declaring: 'It is doubtful whether there is any point in continuing the attacks on radar stations, since not one of those attacked has so far been put out of action.'<sup>407</sup>

Goering should have been Fuhrer after Hitler, because it was his Luftwaffe that knocked out those English radar stations and then finished off the RAF. Hitler would have had them bomb London, like they did Rotterdam. (*MHC*, pp. 77-78)

The *defamiliarized* version of a universally known historical setting may have contributed to the success of 'a novel based on a sensational plot able to attract even the most unsophisticated American reader'.<sup>408</sup> In fact, the action-packed plot — as distant as possible from, say, the introspection of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961) — is enjoyable for its own sake, in the gradual unravelling of a revised version of Kipling's Great Game, now with fascist dictatorships as the global players contending for world supremacy on the field of subjugated and colonized countries.

Yet *The Man in the High Castle* is not primarily concerned with the peculiar nature of the Nazi phenomenon. Rather, Nazism functions in the novel as an especially potent embodiment of primal evil.<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Ferguson, pp. 281-320.

<sup>407</sup> Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, p. 929.

<sup>408</sup> Carlo Pagetti, 'Dick and Meta-SF', trans. by Angela Minchella and Darko Suvin, in R. D. Mullen and Darko Suvin, eds, *Science-Fiction Studies: Selected Articles on Science Fiction 1973-1975* (Boston: Gregg, 1976), pp. 180-187 (p. 184).

<sup>409</sup> John Wilson, 'The Man in the High Castle', in *Magill's Survey of American Literature*, Revised Edition (2007), *Literary Reference Center*. EBSCO <<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=MOL9830000643>> [accessed 4 June 2008].

A puzzling element — as well as an immediate sign of ongoing intercultural contamination — is the repeated recourse by characters of the most diverse backgrounds to the divinatory powers of the *I Ching*:

A book created by the sages of China over a period of five thousand years, winnowed, perfected, that superb cosmology — and science — codified before Europe had even learned to do long division. (*MHC*, p. 14)

Predictably enough, the responses of the oracle are mostly obscure and can be validated only in retrospective:

The fact that its guidance generally proves to be reliable suggests metaphorically that beneath the seeming chaos of human experience there lies a meaningful order. At the same time, the fact that the oracle is frequently enigmatic, requiring considerable interpretation and never easily verifiable, suggests that human access to this immutable order will remain incomplete, always subject to distortion.<sup>410</sup>

Or, rather, the recourse to the *I Ching* might mean that human fate is — literally — consigned to the randomness of coin-tossing.

Ontological displacement is a recurrent theme in Dick's novels, from the artificial hell visited on mankind by a *sui generis* god in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), through the characters suspended between life and death in *Ubik* (1969), to the protagonist's pervasive hallucinations in *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), to mention but a few examples. In *MHC*, multiple, concurrent levels of reality are juxtaposed. The alternate timeline of the narrative is originated, in accordance with the Great Man theory, by the death of President Roosevelt in an attempt on his life, which in real history took place in 1933 at the hand of Joe Zangara (*MHC*, p. 66). Thus, the USSR is vanquished in the early phase of the war, which ends with the capitulation of the Allies in 1947 (*MHC*, p. 9).

However, what is actual in the narrative is contrasted with another timeline, in which Roosevelt survives the attack and prepares the country for war, but leaves office in 1940. Thus, the alternative described in the forbidden novel *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* [hereafter: *Grasshopper*] — a title with biblical reference, although not a direct

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<sup>410</sup> Wilson.

quote as claimed by one of the characters (*MHC*, p. 67)<sup>411</sup> — written by the secretive and secluded Hawthorne Abendsen, does not coincide with our timeline, as the nexus event of the election of a different president from Roosevelt creates, in turn, a second-order counterfactual scenario, in which the destruction of the American fleet at Pearl Harbor is prevented. Further down along the alternative timeline, the second front against the Axis is opened not in Normandy but in the East, through the aid brought by the victorious British army to the Russian defenders of Stalingrad (*MHC*, p. 68).

Much as this makes perfect logic sense of the alternative historical process by linking the events in a plausible causal chain, Dick appears to have been inspired chiefly by epistemic and eschatological concerns in depriving the reader of a comforting, recognizable present-day counterpart to the nightmarish world of the narrative, with its dismal ethics leading to a predictable Armageddon. Nothing is certain, all knowledge of the past disputable, and foreknowledge of the future — even the construction of the plot of Abendsen’s novel-within-the-novel — entrusted to the fortune-telling powers of the *I Ching*. Which is in keeping with Dick’s narrative style featuring multiple points of view, entrusted to diverse characters with anything but rock-steady allegiances and moral attitudes. Reality is not only difficult to perceive thoroughly and correctly, it threatens to fall apart every minute.

The polyphonic quality of Dick’s narrative world is aptly captured by Suvin:

Dick as a rule uses a narration which is neither that of the old-fashioned all-knowing, neutral and superior, narrator, nor a narration in the first person by the central characters. The narration proceeds instead somewhere in between those two extreme possibilities, simultaneously in the third person and from the vantage point of the central or focal character in a given segment. This is always clearly delimited from other segments with other focal characters—first, by means of chapter endings or at least by double spacing within a chapter, and second, by the focal character being named at the beginning of each such narrative segment, usually after a monotony-avoiding introductory sentence or subordinate clause which sets up the time and place of the new narrative segment. The focal character is also used as a visual, auditive, and psychological focus whose vantage point in fact colours and limits the subsequent narration. This permits the empathizing into—usually sympathizing with but always at least understanding—all the focal characters, be

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<sup>411</sup> The ominous reference is most likely to Ecclesiastes 12. 5: ‘Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.’

they villains or heroes in the underlying plot conflict; which is equivalent to saying that Dick has no black or white villains and heroes.<sup>412</sup>

Carter summarizes the complex, ambiguous and mirroring cultural attitudes of the characters:

The Japanese colonizers (represented by Tagomi and the Kasouras) speak English, fetishize American historical objects, and have Christian names like Paul and Betty. Thus, Dick offers a PSA [Pacific States of America] colonized by colonized people, where the Japanese colonizers are mirror images of Western ideals and values instilled by colonialism. In essence, Japanese occupation of the PSA produces results historically associated with Western colonization of Third World countries, and, as Childan's dealings with the Kasouras and Tagomi illustrate, the PSA represents an America occupied and 'oppressed' by a simulation of itself.<sup>413</sup>

In the unstable world of *MHC*, the characters' identities are as shifting as their allegiances. Many of them hide behind aliases, either for the preservation of their safety or to pursue their secret goals: the retired Japanese General Tedeki, the former Imperial Chief of Staff, visits California incognito as 'Mr Yatabe' in order to meet the German emissary Rudolf Wegener posing as Mr Baynes, the Swedish representative of an industrial concern on a commercial mission (*MHC*, p. 185); likewise, the Swiss member of the Nazi secret police bent on the assassination of Abendsen travels across the former US under the identity of the 'wop' Joe Cinnadella (*MHC*, p. 209); Abendsen is suspected by the Nazis of having changed his surname from the Jewish original 'Abendstein' (*MHC*, p. 128), and Frank Fink has chosen the surname 'Frink' to prevent detection and extradition from the Japanese-controlled Pacific States of America to the Nazi-held United States in the east (*MHC*, p. 9); Frink shows up at Childan's shop, posing as the white 'gentleman' at the service of an Admiral Harusha — who later turns out to have long been dead — but in fact he is bent on undermining Childan's trust in the authenticity of the old American objects he is selling (*MHC*, pp. 54-56); finally, after killing the Nazi killer disguised as Joe, Juliana discovers, much to her relief, that she had been registered at the hotel where the couple had stayed as 'Mrs. Cinnadella' (*MHC*, p. 247), which will prevent her identification and apprehension.

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<sup>412</sup> Darko Suvin, 'P.K. Dick's Opus: Artifice as Refuge and World View', in *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 112-133 (p. 114).

<sup>413</sup> Cassie Carter, 'The Metacolonization of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*: Mimicry, Parasitism, and Americanism in the P.S.A.', *Science-Fiction Studies*, 22.67 (November 1995), 333-342 (p. 333).

Predictably, such a proteiform reality has encouraged the most diverse interpretations, sometimes more revelatory of the critical and political views in fashion at the time than of an attitude clearly expressed in the narrative. For example, Pagetti out-Dicks Dick's radical stance when he maintains that in *MHC* 'the victory of the Axis during the Second World War is symbolical of a historical reality in which American society no longer possesses values to oppose to an apparently defeated adversary', and goes on to establish a parallel between Nazi Germany and postwar America that goes beyond the 'arbitrariness that has contaminated history' in the novel: 'Nazi violence, the historical equivalent of the spiritual futility and chaos of modern America, rules the world, and the Nuremberg trial is only a dream.'<sup>414</sup> Although it appears only in the AH-within-AH — or Euchronia within a Dyschronia — of *Grasshopper*, the trial did find place in actual history, which makes a world of moral difference; moreover, in Abendsen's metafictional reconstruction, the court before which even a shaken but defiant Hitler has his *redde rationem* gathers in Munich, not Nuremberg (*MHC*, p. 126). Besides, such a totally negative view of the actual world has been refuted by the author himself while explaining his cosmology:

I could then speak [...] of three rather than two worlds: the black iron prison world that had been; *our intermediate world in which oppression and war exist but have to a great degree been cast down*; and then a third alternate world that someday, when the correct variables in our past have been reprogrammed, will materialize as a superimposition onto this one. . . and within which, as we awaken to it, we shall suppose we had always lived there, the memory of this intermediate one, like that of the black iron prison world, eradicated mercifully from our memories.

[...]

If a grimmer reality could have once occupied the space that our world occupies, it stands to reason that the process of reweaving need not end here; *this is not the best of all possible worlds, just as it is not the worst.*<sup>415</sup>

Suvin shares the general view that 'the specific political and ontological relationships in each of [Dick's alternate worlds] are analogous to the USA (or simply to

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<sup>414</sup> Pagetti, p. 182.

<sup>415</sup> Philip K. Dick, 'If You Find This World Bad, You Should See Some of the Others', *Grey Lodge Occult Review*, 10 (February 2004) <[http://www.greylodge.org/occultreview/glor\\_010/dick\\_world.htm](http://www.greylodge.org/occultreview/glor_010/dick_world.htm)> [accessed 3 November 2008]. Delivered as a speech at the second *Festival International de la Science-Fiction de Metz*, France, in September 1977, it was first published in French translation in *L'Année 1977-78 de la S.-F. et du Fantastique* (Juilliard, 1978), ed. by Jacques Goimard. First published in English in *PKDS Newsletter*, 27 (August 1991); emphasis added.

California) in the 1950's and 60's'.<sup>416</sup> However, he is not satisfied with an unexamined moral equivalence between the Axis powers and the US but draws instead an accurate map of the social and racial landscape of *MHC*, with Childan functioning as a *trait-d'union* between the upper level of the German and Japanese dominators and the lower level of the dominated Americans. The middle level of 'collaborationists' is also occupied by Wyndam-Matson, the owner of a company commercializing — mostly, counterfeiting — the Americana cherished by Japanese collectors such as Paul and Betty Kasouras, the young affluent couple developing an awkward relationship to their antique dealer Childan. Linked to the *pinocs* — 'the puppet white government at Sacramento [subordinated to] the real authorities, the Japanese' (*MHC*, p. 8) — Wyndam-Matson is also the former employer of the Jewish artificer Frink, who later sets up business with his friend Ed McCarthy and produces his own, *original* American artifacts (*MHC*, pp. 101-102). The circle — or, rather, the web — of interrelations is completed by the tenuous link still extant between Frink and his estranged wife Juliana, who in turn is to cooperate — unwittingly at first, unwillingly later — with the Nazi assassin whose courtship she half-heartedly accepts, and who is trying to gain access to Abendsen through her.<sup>417</sup>

Suvin is also right in pointing to the unrealistic portrait of social and racial relationship in the Japanese-controlled portion of the former US: 'The assumption that a victorious Japanese fascism would be radically better than the German one is the major political blunder of Dick's novel.'<sup>418</sup> Nevertheless, Dick skilfully describes the ambiguous relationship between former enemies and the awkwardness generated by a reversal of the social and racial roles connected to the readers' horizon of expectation.

In this respect, a useful function is performed by the contamination of the characters' speech by the language of the conquerors. Whether this results in 'a stilted English with only tenuous relationships to the Japanese grammar' is immaterial,<sup>419</sup> much more relevant is the effect of reciprocal cultural influence it creates. On the one hand, the

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<sup>416</sup> Suvin, 1988, p. 113.

<sup>417</sup> Suvin, 1988, p. 115.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>419</sup> Collins, p. 110.

conquerors are fascinated by the material aspects of the vanquished and vanishing American culture, reduced to a reservoir of exotic recipes and objects catering to the snobbish taste of upper-class Japanese; on the other hand, the conquered mimic the language of the dominators in their intercourse with them, thus literally paying lip service to their new masters:

‘That recalls fine speech I heard by Doctor Goebbels,’ Robert Childan said. ‘On radio, year or so ago. Much witty invective. Had audience in palm of hand, as usual. Ranged throughout gamut of emotionality. No doubt; with original Adolf Hitler out of things, Doctor Goebbels A-one Nazi speaker.’ (*MHC*, 106-107)

Not incidentally, Childan occasionally slips into a similarly elliptical syntax in his thought, when there are no commercial interests or aspirations to upward social mobility to motivate him: ‘Clearly out of your hands. Entirely. Bad taste on your part to presume to stop me or argue with me’ (*MHC*, p. 180).

Such usage may not be accurate in reproducing either Japanese syntax or the more immediate form of interlinguistic influence, which operates through lexicon rather than syntax; yet it is significant in that it highlights the social and racial interrelationships in the world of the novel. For example, the outcast Frink, who relies on false documents to keep his Jewish identity concealed, mimetically adopts the Japanese-English of the dominators and their collaborators when he visits Childan’s shop under cover:

Due to pressure of appointments, the admiral cannot pay personal visit to your esteemed store. [...] As is well known, [...] your shop sells such priceless antique artifacts from the pages of American history. Alas, all too rapidly vanishing into limbo of time. (*MHC*, pp. 54-55)

Although he has abandoned his earlier postwar plans of violent revenge on the conquerors and invaders of his country, Frink does manage to put up an opposition of sorts. He is not nearly as powerful as Tagomi or Freiherr Hugo Reiss — the aristocratic German consul in San Francisco who resents the vulgar brutality of Kreuz vom Meere, the head of the Sicherheitsdienst in the PSA (*MHC*, pp. 119-120) — nor as actively determinate as his former wife Juliana, who is a judo instructor. Yet in cultural terms his resistance is even more effective than theirs. The objects produced by Frank constitute an attempt to break loose from the aesthetic standards of the Japanese colonizers, who

would relegate the natives to the role of passive custodians of a supposedly glorious past, and establish a new, original form of American art, puzzling to the extreme for the dominators who would rely on comfortable, demeaning classifications:

An entire new world is pointed to, by this. The name for it is neither art, for it has no form, nor religion. What is it? I have pondered this pin unceasingly, yet cannot fathom it. We evidently lack the word for an object like this. [...] It is authentically a new thing on the face of the world. (*MHC*, p. 176)

But the colonizers misinterpret the categories of the colonized culture and promote to the status of priceless collector's item 'an almost mint copy of Volume One, Number One of Tip Top Comics. Dating from the 'thirties, it was a choice piece of Americana; one of the first funny books, a prize collectors searched for constantly' (*MHC*, p. 22). Collectors of exotic art worldwide are prone to this kind of aesthetic and perceptive distortion. Tagomi — himself a refined and enthusiastic collector of American artifacts — tries to dismiss the vision elicited by one of Frank's objects by imputing it to a form of psychic astigmatism:

Now one appreciates Saint Paul's incisive word choice . . . seen through glass darkly not a metaphor, but astute reference to optical distortion. We really do see astigmatically, in fundamental sense: our space and our time creations of our own psyche, and when these momentarily falter — like acute disturbance of middle ear. Occasionally we list eccentrically, all sense of balance gone. (*MHC*, p. 233)

The schizophrenic position of Ed and Frank is that of (post)colonial artists in general, caught as they are between the search for new outlets for expression and the impossible recovery of their lost roots; in the case of America, the quest is further complicated by the existence/absence of a preceding native substratum, extensively removed by the European colonizers. The issue also underscores Dick's preference for the figure of the artificer, represented in *MHC* by Frink and, in a sense, by the wordsmith Abendsen, the creator of an entire world of the imagination.<sup>420</sup> Quite evident is the superiority of Frink's technical knowledge to the mere commercial skills of Childan, who tries to exploit the inexperience of Ed and Frank by making them accede to his unfair contractual terms (*MHC*, pp. 141-148) but cannot recognize the spuriousness of

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<sup>420</sup> Suvin, 1988, p. 116.

the objects he commercializes; in contrast, Frink is able to show him at first scrutiny the faults that betray the process of artificial aging of the materials in the forged Civil War gun he pretended to be going to buy from Childan, perhaps the very process he had applied when he worked for Wyndam-Matson (*MHC*, p. 56). One might optimistically infer — especially by Tagomi’s shocked and awed reaction to Frink’s artistic creation — that the American artificers under Japanese occupation have bypassed the first two stages, envisioned by Fanon in the process of nation-building, of acceptance and refusal of foreign influence and reached the third, fecund ‘zone of occult instability’ that will make possible the development of a new, authentic national consciousness.<sup>421</sup> Which could also be a riposte to those who lament the absence of resistance in the novel.<sup>422</sup>

Thus the novel touches upon the crucial questions of historicity and authenticity. For example, a cigarette lighter formerly belonging to Roosevelt possesses ‘historicity’ but is practically indistinguishable from another specimen: ‘the paper [of authenticity] proves its worth, not the object itself’ (*MHC*, pp. 63-64). The criteria are those famously presented by Walter Benjamin: ‘The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.’<sup>423</sup> Thus, what distinguishes the lighter from an otherwise perfectly identical specimen is not so much a scratch on its surface as the *aura*, the *uniqueness* that is also typical of artistic creation but is not exhausted by ‘mere genuineness’; rather, it has a ritual quality to it inasmuch as it conveys a presence but at a same time a distance, an ultimate ‘unapproachability’, as in the religious images portraying humans extending their hands toward the divine figure but never actually touching it, arresting their gesture just short of the aura.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> See Frantz Fanon, ‘On National Culture’, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 1990; first published 1961), pp. 166-189 (p. 183).

<sup>422</sup> Collins, pp. 216-218. See also Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Novels of Philip K. Dick* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1984).

<sup>423</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt and trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969; first published 1968), pp. 217-251 (p. 221).

<sup>424</sup> Benjamin, p. 243 Note 5 and p. 244 Note 6.

The realization that the aura — or *wu* (*MHC*, p. 175) — of the objects Frink has created would wither if they were reproduced serially and commercialized prompts even the shrewd collaborator Childan to an act of pride refusal: he prefers the loss of a great financial opportunity to the humiliation he would have felt at the implicit admission of the inferiority of his culture, capable of nothing but producing cheap objects for ‘the vast number of uneducated’, before the enlightened young Japanese Paul.

Good-luck charms. To be worn. By relatively poor people. A line of amulets to be peddled all over Latin America and the Orient. Most of the masses still believe in magic, you know. Spells. Potions. It’s a big business, I am told. (*MHC*, pp. 179-180)

Nothing for the happy few who can afford and appreciate real art:

They can obtain from mold-produced identical objects a joy which would be denied to us. We must suppose that we have the only one of a kind, or at least something rare, possessed by a very few. And, of course, something truly authentic. Not a model or replica. [...] Not something cast by the tens of thousands. (*Ibidem*)

The question of ‘authenticity’, in its double meaning of ‘identification of that particular work of art as produced by that individual artist’ and ‘expression of the true, original characteristics of a community and its culture’, is highly relevant to the novel and finds its objective correlative in the ‘artifacts’ of ‘American culture’ sold by Childan: literally, as many of them turn out to be forgeries; culturally, as they raise the question of what does constitute or represent ‘American culture’. In a reversal of the roles and points of view encountered in the postcolonial theory of our timeline, it is the Japanese colonizers who grant or deny aesthetic and economic value to the ‘artifacts’ of the country they have conquered: thus, a prewar Mickey Mouse watch becomes, in Tagomi’s evaluation, ‘most authentic of dying old U.S. culture, a rare retained artifact carrying flavor of bygone alcyon day’ and ranking ‘among the finest objects d’art of America available’ (*MHC*, p. 44).

The authenticity issue is ironically defused by the undisputable functionality of the ‘perfectly preserved U.S. 1860 Civil War Colt .44, a treasured collector’s item’ belonging to Tagomi (*MHC*, p. 192). Although it might be a forgery, as the one Frink examines in Childan’s shop, it will serve its proprietor just as well and be instrumental in

thwarting the attempt by the German secret police to disrupt the secret meeting between Wegener/Baynes and Tedeki/Yatabe at Tagomi's office.

The moral as well as the ontological constitution of the fictional world is far from definite. Even the characters who at a first glance would appear to be the undisputable heroes of the narrative have their faults. Juliana is at first enticed by the prospect of some precarious romance with the mysterious and moody truck driver Joe Cinnadella and accepts to follow him and take all the material advantage she can from his dubious generosity, without seriously questioning his motives until he turns out to be a Nazi assassin, sent out to kill the author of the subversive *Grasshopper* and determined to use her as a cover and a decoy. Abendsen, although saved by Juliana, does not show a particular willingness to clarify the import of his narrative — indeed, he is rather evasive, puzzling, and sarcastic in his answers. Even the righteous Tagomi — shocked by the insoluble moral dilemma of having to take lives in order to save other lives — does not refuse to extradite the Jew Frink to Nazi-controlled territory out of a genuine sense of justice and human solidarity; rather, his deed appears to be a whimsical retaliation for the assault undergone in his very office by his guests, who were trying to establish contact between the Japanese authorities and one Nazi faction in order to avert the danger of an all-out nuclear attack against the Home Islands. He had not refrained from letting Childan bear the brunt of their social and racial difference, when the latter failed to deliver him according to schedule the antique object he had ordered; and the thing that puzzles and irritates him most, in his vision of an alternate America resembling the actual one, is the failure by the white customers of a lunch counter to acknowledge his superiority. He even indulges, much to his amazement, in 'unworthy [...] dreadful low-class jingoistic racist invectives' (*MHC*, p. 231). Paradoxically, 'he finds himself simultaneously on both sides of the civil rights conflict of the 1960s, a member of the ruling class suddenly denied his former privileges and a victim of racial prejudice'.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> McKnight, p. 87.

A form of dramatic irony is present in all AH that refers, more or less obliquely, to a reality that the characters are supposed to ignore. In an instance thereof, Tagomi is addressed by one of the white patrons as ‘Tojo’, a racial slur quite transparent to readers but probably lost on him in its reference to Hideki Tojo, the Japanese Prime Minister who was targeted by American wartime propaganda and later executed for war crimes — including the approval of biological experiments on prisoners of war<sup>426</sup> — the personification of that brutal attitude towards conquered enemies rejected by the later, more enlightened Japanese of Tagomi’s ilk.

Dick’s multiplication of narrative and ontological levels avoids what would appear a facile reversal of WWII in which, as in real history, the winners also set the moral standards by which the losers are judged.<sup>427</sup> Thus, British commandos who ‘had become especially fanatic during the last phases of the war when it was clear that the Allies could not win’ are subsequently brought to trial and punished (*MHC*, pp. 81-84). Actual Nazi and alternative British atrocities are explicitly compared by Joe:

They talk about the things the Nazis did to the Jews [...]. The British have done worse. In the Battle of London. [...] Those fire weapons, phosphorus and oil; I saw a few of the German troops, afterward. Boat after boat burned to a cinder. Those pipes under the water — turned the sea to fire. And on civilian populations, by those mass fire-bombing raids that Churchill thought were going to save the war at the last moment. Those terror attacks on Hamburg and Essen and — (*MHC*, pp. 81-82)

Although by no means objective even in his overt identity of former Fascist soldier, Joe does have a point, ethical as well as historiographical. His description inevitably prompts the reminiscence of the actual fire-bombing of Dresden, which cost tens of thousands of civilian lives in the last phase of the war and is still being debated as a possible act of retaliation aimed at terrorizing an already defeated enemy, rather than achieving any real

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<sup>426</sup> For a ghastly account of such experiments and Tojo’s controversial role, see Nicholas D. Kristof, ‘Unmasking Horror — A special report: Japan Confronting Gruesome War Atrocity’, *New York Times*, 17 March 1995.

<sup>427</sup> See Richard Drayton, ‘An Ethical Blank Check: British and US Mythology About the Second World War Ignores Our Own Crimes and Legitimizes Anglo-American Warmaking’, *Guardian*, 10 May 2005.

strategic goal.<sup>428</sup> Furthermore, the British determination ‘to go all lengths’ in the event of a German invasion had been admitted by Churchill himself in his memoirs.<sup>429</sup>

Tagomi’s vision, in which a dimly recognizable version of our world is unfavourably compared to its fictional alternative, is also ‘a Dickian set scene which recreates [...] the great utopian tradition that treats a return to the reader’s freeways, smog, and jukebox civilization as a vision of hell—exactly as at the end of *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Looking Backward*, or *News From Nowhere*’.<sup>430</sup> The alternative, much more chaotic, polluted and noisy version of San Francisco upsetting Tagomi has as its most representative landmark the Embarcadero Freeway:

God, what is that? He stopped, gaped at hideous misshapen thing on skyline. Like nightmare of roller coaster suspended, blotting out view. Enormous construction of metal and cement in air. (*MHC*, p. 231)

Consisting of an elevated double-decker built after WWII as part of California State Route 480, and demolished in 1989 after being damaged by the Loma Prieta earthquake, the structure recalls, in its gigantic ugliness, the hubristic architecture described in Gibson’s ‘The Gernsback Continuum’, and the ‘freeways [...] unfolding themselves into [...] gleaming eighty-lane monsters’.<sup>431</sup>

After the war, everyone had a car — no wings for it — and the promised superhighway to drive it down, so that the sky itself darkened, and the fumes ate the marble and pitted the miracle crystal...<sup>432</sup>

Mad dream, Mr. Tagomi thought. Must wake up. Where are the pedecabs today? He began to walk faster. Whole vista has dull, smoky, tomb-world cast. Smell of burning. Dim gray buildings, sidewalk, peculiar harsh tempo in people. (*MHC*, p. 231)

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<sup>428</sup> In contrast, the justification for the similarly appalling fire-bombing of Tokyo — and the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki — in the prevention of the huge losses that US troops would have suffered should they have been forced to invade Japan has been invoked, among others, by Robert McNamara, who during the War analyzed the efficiency of US bombings and later became Secretary of State. He still defended the bombings many years after the events, in the extraordinary, open-hearted interview reported in Errol Morris’s documentary film *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003).

<sup>429</sup> Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, p. 939. See also Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, vol. 2 of *The Second World War*, 6 vols (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981; first published 1948-1954), 246.

<sup>430</sup> Suvin, 1988, p. 116.

<sup>431</sup> Gibson, p. 23.

<sup>432</sup> Gibson, p. 27.

However, in the actual world of *MHC*, environmental friendliness comes at a racial price, as motorcars are extensively replaced by *pedecabs* driven by Asians; one of them is called a ‘*chink*’ by Childan (*MHC*, p. 22),

The rather inconclusive end of the novel denies the existence of a unified centre of consciousness and knowledge. Juliana’s claim to the ultimate interpretation of the embedded narrative written by Abendsen as portraying the actual world appears ill-grounded if taken as literally as she does:

What is it Abendsen wanted to say? Nothing about his make-believe world. Am I the only one who knows? I’ll bet I am; nobody else really understands *Grasshopper* but me — they just imagine they do. [...]

He told us about our own world, she thought as she unlocked the door to her motel room. This, what’s around us now. In the room, she again switched on the radio. He wants us to see it for what it is. (*MHC*, pp. 248-249)

Nor is Abendsen himself willing — or able — to provide at first a convincing, comprehensive explanation:

‘Then why did you write the book?’ Juliana said. Indicating with his drink glass, Abendsen said, ‘What’s that pin on your dress do? Ward off dangerous anima-spirits of the immutable world? Or does it just hold everything together?’

[...]

‘Everyone has — technical secrets. You have yours; I have mine. You should read my book and accept it on face value, just as I accept what I see — ’ Again he pointed at her with his glass. ‘Without inquiring if it’s genuine underneath, there, or done with wires and staves and foam-rubber padding. Isn’t that part of trusting in the nature of people and what you see in general?’ (*MHC*, pp. 253-254)

Juliana’s pin was a gift from Frink, which, given the significance of another object he created in the epiphany it provokes in Tagomi, has incited one interpreter to take Abendsen at face value indeed, by suggesting that the pin is in fact the element holding the reality of the novel together.<sup>433</sup>

To compound matters in an even more inextricable maze, interpreters have sought for clues in the papers of the prolific author. It appears thus that he had devised an alternative ending, in which the Nazis resort to time travel to visit the alternative timeline

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<sup>433</sup> See Paul Williams, ‘Una conversazione con Philip K. Dick’, in Philip Dick, *La Svastica sul sole* [*The Man in the High Castle*], trans. by Riccardo Valla and Luca Signorelli (Milan: Nord, 1993), pp. 268-281 (p. 279). See also David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature* (Bloomington; London: Indiana University Press, 1974).

described by Abendsen.<sup>434</sup> Whether by design or authorial second thoughts, *MHC* ends inconclusively as regards not only the overarching nature of things but, more prosaically, the individual destiny of the characters: while their separate vicissitudes may have led Frink and Juliana to the rather conventional realization of their still enduring intimate communion, Tagomi has a heart attack, from which it is not clear if and to what extent he will recover (*MHC*, pp. 239-240); his mission accomplished, Wegener flies back to Germany and is collected at the airport by agents who claim to be members of the faction in the Nazi regime he is supporting at the moment, but of whose identity and allegiance he cannot be sure until they reach their final destination.

But what does it matter? Even if Doctor Goebbels is deposed and Operation Dandelion [the planned surprise nuclear attack on Japan] is canceled? They will still exist, the blackshirts, the Partei, the schemes if not in the Orient then somewhere else. On Mars and Venus.

[...] The terrible dilemma of our lives. Whatever happens, it is evil beyond compare. Why struggle, then? Why choose? If all alternatives are the same . . .

Evidently we go on, as we always have. From day to day. [...] But we cannot do it all at once; it is a sequence. An unfolding process. We can only control the end by making a choice at each step.

He thought, We can only hope. And try.

On some other world, possibly it is different. Better. There are clear good and evil alternatives. Not these obscure admixtures, these blends, with no proper tool by which to untangle the components.

We do not have the ideal world, such as we would like, where morality is easy because cognition is easy. Where one can do right with no effort because he can detect the obvious. (*MHC*, pp. 245-246)

The same concerns had been expressed, with similar wording, by Tagomi:

I cannot face this dilemma, Mr. Tagomi said to himself. That man should have to act in such moral ambiguity. There is no Way in this; all is muddled. All chaos of light and dark, shadow and substance. (*MHC*, p. 190)

The conclusions he comes to are even grimmer than those reached by Wegener, who still hopes for some positive change; there is an eschatological quality to Tagomi's despair:

There is evil! It's actual like cement.

I can't believe it. I can't stand it. Evil is not a view. [...] All our religion is wrong. What'll I do? [...]

It's an ingredient in us. In the world. Poured over us, filtering into our bodies, minds, hearts, into the pavement itself.

Why?

We're blind moles. Creeping through the soil, feeling with our snouts. We know nothing. I perceived this . . . now I don't know where to go. Screech with fear, only. Run away.

[...]

We are all insects. [...] Groping toward something terrible or divine. (*MHC*, pp. 96-99)

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<sup>434</sup> Collins, p. 220.

The disturbing suggestion is that man in the real world is also groping in the dark, proceeding by trial and error with no cognitive and moral compass to show the way — and with nuclear Armageddon lurking behind the corner, particularly in that stage of the Cold War.

Thus, neither readers nor characters can ever know for sure what is really happening, let alone agree on one version and interpretation of reality and its alternatives. As diverse as possible are the attitudes toward the dystopian world of the novel as opposed to the eutopian — from a *presentist* viewpoint — alternative of *Grasshopper*. As seen above, the world of *MHC* is a chaotic nightmare for Wegener and Tagomi; but it makes perfect sense for Wyndam-Matson, who rejects as dystopian — as well as impossible — the alternative of *Grasshopper*. Both his material interests and the hindsight bias make inevitable to him the chain of events that produced the world he inhabits. The following excerpts from his conversation with his young lover on the subject will illustrate the counterfactual reasoning underlying the alternative courses of the war:

‘Listen. Japan would have won anyhow. Even if there had been no Pearl Harbor.’

‘The U.S. fleet — in his book — keeps them from taking the Philippines and Australia.’

‘They would have taken them anyhow; their fleet was superior. I know the Japanese fairly well, and it was their destiny to assume dominance in the Pacific. The U.S. was on the decline ever since World War One. Every country on the Allied side was ruined in that war, morally and spiritually.’

With stubbornness, the girl said, ‘And if the Germans hadn’t taken Malta, Churchill would have stayed in power and guided England to victory.’

‘How? Where?’

‘In North Africa — Churchill would have defeated Rommel finally.’

Wyndam-Matson guffawed.

‘And once the British had defeated Rommel, they could move their whole army back and up through Turkey to join remnants of Russian armies and make a stand — in the book, they halt the Germans’ eastward advance into Russia at some town on the Volga. [...]’

‘What’s it called?’

‘Stalingrad. And the British turn the tide of the war, there. So, in the book, Rommel never would have linked up with those German armies that came down from Russia, von Paulus’ armies; remember? And the Germans never would have been able to go on into the Middle East and get the needed oil, or on into India like they did and link up with the Japanese. And — ‘

‘No strategy on earth could have defeated Erwin Rommel,’ Wyndam-Matson said. ‘And no events like this guy dreamed up, this town in Russia very heroically called ‘Stalingrad’, no holding action could have done any more than delay the outcome; it couldn’t have changed it. Listen. I met Rommel. In New York, when I was there on business, in 1948.’ Actually, he had only seen the Military Governor of the U.S.A. At a reception in the White House, and at a distance. ‘What a man. What dignity and bearing. So I know what I’m talking about,’ he wound up. (*MHC*, pp. 67-69)

While the reference to a *manifest destiny* of domination for Japan will sound ironically familiar to American ears, the *a posteriori* razionalization of the defeat may also explain, better than any speculation brought forward on the subject, the absence of an active, organized American resistance to occupation, as the same occurred in real history Japan, in spite of the fanatical patriotism and the strenuous, suicidal resistance put up against all odds, in the final phase of the war, until the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki revealed that to continue the fight was not only futile but would bring the country to total destruction.

In contrast, readers will see the contemporary real world as a poor replica of the one imagined by Abendsen, but still better than the reality of the novel. *Grasshopper* is sneeringly defined a ‘utopia’ by Joe (*MHC*, p. 158). In fact, it depicts a world that is better than both the dystopia that is actual in the narrative and the world in which Dick lives: for instance, cheap televisions sets are widely distributed in Third World countries and employed for educational purposes (*MHC*, p. 157) — a project as utopian as the present-day One Laptop per Child initiative.<sup>435</sup>

Yet even the world of *Grasshopper* is not exempt from international conflict. Indeed, the Allied victory does not establish perpetual peace, but, rather, a problematic coexistence of the two remaining powers, the USA and the British Empire, the latter still ruled by Churchill ‘like some old warlord out of Central Asia’, as Joe, who has already read the book, summarizes for Juliana:

The U.S. has the Pacific [...]. They divide Russia. It works for around ten years. Then there’s trouble — naturally. [...] Human nature. [...] Nature of states. Suspicion, fear, greed. Churchill thinks the U.S.A. is undermining British rule in South Asia by appealing to the large Chinese populations, who naturally are pro-U.S.A., due to Chiang Kai-shek. The British start setting up [...] what are called ‘detention preserves’. Concentration camps, in other words. For thousands of maybe disloyal Chinese. They’re accused of sabotage and propaganda. (*MHC*, 160)

Which eerily recalls the harsh treatment of thousands of American citizens of Japanese descent during WWII.

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<sup>435</sup> ‘The mission of *One Laptop per Child (OLPC)* is to empower the children of developing countries to learn by providing one connected laptop to every school-age child.’ See <<http://www.laptopgiving.org/en/index.php>> [accessed 27 October 2008].

After his initial, inane plans for rebellion, Frink comes to terms with the postwar reality in which he has found a provisional safe haven. As for Childan, his attitude as a relatively privileged member of the colonized community depending for his welfare on the goodwill and generosity of the colonizers is mutable. He cultivates suppressed rage at the feeling of having been dispossessed: 'There is no deceiving anyone; I do not belong here. On this land that white men cleared and built one of their finest cities. I am an outsider in my own country' (*MHC*, p. 104). But the alternative of an Allied victory in the war is by no means preferable to him:

I have strong convictions on the subject. [...] I have frequently thought it over. The world would be much worse. [...] Communism would rule everywhere, [...] We have had to suffer, to pay the cost [...]. But we did it for a good cause. To stop Slavic world inundation. (*MHC*, p. 111)

In fact Childan echoes the views of the Nazis as expressed — under cover — by Joe:

There isn't anything they've done we wouldn't have done if we'd been in their places. They saved the world from Communism. We'd be living under Red rule now, if it wasn't for Germany. We'd be worse off. (*MHC*, p. 86)

Later, however, Childan's feelings shift to awed admiration for the sophistication and ease by which the Japanese exercise power:

This was how the Japanese ruled, not crudely but with subtlety, ingenuity, timeless cunning. Christ! We're barbarians compared to them, Childan realized. We're no more than boobs against such pitiless reasoning. [...] Humiliated me and my race. And I'm helpless. There's no avenging this; we are defeated and our defeats are like this, so tenuous, so delicate, that we're hardly able to perceive them. In fact, we have to rise a notch in our evolution to know it ever happened. What more proof could be presented, as to the Japanese fitness to rule? (*MHC*, p. 182)

As a whole, his mimetic attitude makes him the character most satisfied with the world as it is, whereas the world of *Grasshopper* is only a nightmare to him, instructive in that it reinforces his beliefs:

We live in a society of law and order, where Jews can't pull their subtleties on the innocent. We're protected.

[...]

Tomorrow I will have to go out and buy that *Grasshopper* book, he told himself. It'll be interesting to see how the author depicts a world run by Jews and Communists, with the Reich in ruins, Japan no doubt a province of Russia; in fact, with Russia extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific. I wonder if he — whatever his name is — depicts a war between Russia and the U.S.A.? Interesting book, he thought. Odd nobody thought of writing it before. [...] It should help to bring home to us how lucky we are. In spite of the obvious disadvantages . . . we could be so much worse off. Great moral lesson pointed out by that book. Yes, there are Japs in power here, and we have to build. Out of this are coming great things, such as the colonization of the planets. (*MHC*, p. 117)

Apparently Dick toyed with the idea of a sequel to *MHC*, featuring an Abendsen apprehended by the Nazis and engaging in an ambiguous, Stockholm-syndrome-like relationship with one of his guardians, whose purposes are no less obscure than those of the mysterious entity that Abendsen believes to have inspired *Grasshopper* — instead of the *I Ching* he reluctantly admits to have used in *MHC* (pp. 255-256) — and to be still pursuing through him its own inscrutable goals.<sup>436</sup>

However fruitful — even indispensable — with works whose textual constitution is uncertain, the philological approach is more dubious when an authorial version is available; it is bound to be frustrated with an author so consistently and purposefully inconsistent as Dick, who deliberately baffles critical efforts to establish one stable and reliable interpretation of his work. The narrator of *MHC* is by no means omniscient and does not provide any superior, authorial knowledge of the fictional worlds and of their relationships:

In *The Man in the High Castle* I give no real explanation as to why or how Mr. Tagomi slid across into our universe; he simply sat in the park and scrutinized a piece of modern abstract handmade jewelry — sat and studied it on and on — and when he looked up, he was in another universe. I didn't explain how or why this happened because I don't know, and I would defy anyone, writer, reader, or critic, to give a so-called 'explanation'. There cannot be one because, of course, as we all know, such a concept is merely a fictional premise; none of us, in our right minds, entertains for even an instant the notion that such alternate universes exist in any actual sense. But let us say, just for fun, that they do. Then, if they do, how are they linked to each other, if in fact they are (or would be) linked? If you drew a map of them, showing their locations, what would the map look like? For instance (and I think this is a very important question), are they absolutely separate one from another, or do they overlap? Because if they overlap, then such problems as 'Where do they exist?' and 'How do you get from one to the next?' admit to a possible solution. I am saying, simply, if they do indeed exist, and if they do indeed overlap, then we may in some literal, very real sense inhabit several of them to various degrees at any given time.<sup>437</sup>

In the final analysis, readers could feel authorized — in the etymological sense of the word — to choose for several, contrasting interpretations, including the *multiverse* option of each reality coexisting with the others, on separate or even communicating levels. Which is not to say that one should espouse Tagomi's nihilism, when he instructs his secretary how to make sense of the hypocritical condolence note he just recorded for the Nazi government on the occasion of the death of Martin Bormann, the successor to

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<sup>436</sup> Williams, pp. 271-272.

<sup>437</sup> Dick, 2004.

the ailing Hitler as Reichsfuehrer, and which sounds so false already while playing back, an ‘insectlike squeak [...]. Cortical flappings and scrapings’: ‘Work the sentences, if you wish, so that they will mean something.[...] Or so that they mean nothing. Whichever you prefer’ (*MHC*, p. 99).

One should never judge a book by its cover, or so goes the saying. This is fairly true of *MHC*, whose original cover simply juxtaposes the Swastika and the Rising Sun;<sup>438</sup> whereas the juxtaposition apparently summarizes the import of the narrative by providing a metonymical image of the Powers of the age, surely there is much more to the plot than a struggle for world domination involving spies and counterspies. In fact, even the qualification of the novel as Direct Dyschronia (according to the classification in Section 1.2.4. above) is not watertight. Firstly, the world of the primary narrative is neither totally different from our timeline nor identifiable with it, although the totalitarian society it portrays may uncannily recall some aspects of the US of the 1960s, such as an attitude of superiority and mindless consumerism toward other cultures, and the enduring racial tension and discrimination. Secondly, the world in which the characters live is contrasted by the embedded counternarrative of *Grasshopper*, describing a Euechronia much closer to real history but, once again, not reducible to it: for example, technology has been exploited for better, more immediately useful ends than the vain pursuit of space conquest — another disturbing aspect linking Nazi hubris in *MHC* to the enormous resources absorbed by the NASA. Finally, the moral as well as the ontological constitution of the novel are far from certain, since neither characters nor narratorial entities reach any definitive consensus about them.

In contrast, the cover of the next novel analyzed is quite meaningful.

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<sup>438</sup> Fig. 1. See also Rosenfeld, 2005, p. 105 Figure 7.

## 2.2. Robert Harris, *Fatherland*

The way that the Nazis staged themselves and presented themselves, my Lord!  
I'm talking about the films of Leni Riefenstahl and the buildings of Albert Speer and the mass  
marches and the flags — just fantastic. Really beautiful.  
(Bryan Ferry)<sup>439</sup>

The analysis of Robert Harris' *Fatherland*<sup>440</sup> may well start from the original cover image, which is significant as regards both the description of the alternate world and the attitude of the narrative toward it: the flags of the Reich and of the European Union are raised on a monumental silhouette recognizable as the top of the Brandenburg Gate.<sup>441</sup> The immediate implication is that Europeans will bow before any dominator ruthless or wily enough to subjugate them, be it a Führer, or an *Empereur*, or a Eurocrat. While there can be little doubt as to the author's personal opinion on the matter and the parallels he draws,<sup>442</sup> in the world of the novel even the European anthem is the same as in the real world, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (*FL*, p. 38). Thus, not only the subject matter of a book, but also the issues raised by its contents can sometimes be inferred by the cover.

The novel marks a watershed because it has reached a wider, general readership, beyond the more specialized readership of AH and SF fans:

*Fatherland*, a fast-moving, first-rate detective story, has been a wild success in the English speaking world. In Great Britain, the novel made its author 1992's most popular hardback thriller writer. In the United States, *Fatherland* was on the New York Times bestseller list for three months. By May 1993, more than two-and-a-half million copies had been sold around the world.<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> 'Ferry Apologises for Nazi Remarks', *BBC News*, 16 April 2007 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/6561177.stm>> [accessed 17 April 2007].

<sup>440</sup> Robert Harris, *Fatherland* (London: Hutchinson, 1992). Hereafter: *FL*. Page numbers have been inserted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>441</sup> Fig. 5.

<sup>442</sup> See for example his *Sunday Times* article 'We Can't Rebuild the Berlin Wall Too Soon', published on 25 February 1990 and partially reproduced in Harald Husemann, 'If Adolf Had Come; If Helmut Were to Come', in *The Novel in Anglo-German Context: Cultural Cross-Currents and Affinities*, ed. by Susanne Stark (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 399-424 (p. 414).

<sup>443</sup> Bardo Fassbender, 'A Novel, Germany's Past, and the Dilemmas of Civilised Germans', *Contemporary Review*, 265.1546 (November 1994), 236-246 (p. 236).

Although less important in terms of literary canonization, its public acclaim could have been as significant for the recognition of AH as has been for SF the inclusion of two volumes from Dick's work in the prestigious *Library of America* series.<sup>444</sup> The success reached by *FL* is all the more remarkable because it marked its author's literary debut: previously, Harris had been an editor and columnist with *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times*; he had also written a successful account of the Hitler diary hoax,<sup>445</sup> which in a sense anticipated some key issues in *FL*, namely, the quest for historical truth and the danger of its manipulation.

While surely the novel's Eurosceptic stance was not the only feature that made it popular in some parts, it also sparked controversy elsewhere. Perhaps predictably, in the light of 'the peculiar German concept of political correctness which rather focuses on Germany's history than on current problems of German society', the reception of the book in Germany has been far less unanimously positive than abroad:

Robert Harris' equating of Hitler's occupied Europe with the present European Community has very much contributed to the book's rejection in Germany, and is indeed the most debatable feature of the novel.<sup>446</sup>

The country's problematic dealings with its past caused as many as twenty-five German publishing houses to reject its translation, which was eventually accepted by the Swiss publisher Haffmans in Zurich; the German edition by Heyne did not appear until 1994, but the selling figures were flattering. This reflects two 'contradictory impulses' of the German public: 'a desire to be liberated from the burdens of remembrance and adopt a more carefree attitude towards it' is countered by 'ongoing reservations about violating a morally informed stance towards the Nazi era'.<sup>447</sup> Critique for the novel came from both sides of the German political fence, although with some distinctions:

Unlike the left, they [the conservatives] do not so much disapprove of particular ways of dealing with the Hitler period. Rather, they disapprove of dealing with this time at all. 'Fifty years of

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<sup>444</sup> Philip K. Dick, *Four novels of the 1960s* (New York: Library of America, 2007); *Five Novels of the 1960s and 70s* (New York: Library of America, 2008).

<sup>445</sup> Robert Harris, *Selling Hitler: The Story of the Hitler Diaries* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).

<sup>446</sup> Fassbender, p. 236.

<sup>447</sup> Rosenfeld, 2005, p. 185.

*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, of getting over the past, are enough!’ they say. An ever-continued focus on the twelve years of Nazism (‘a comparatively short part of German history’) could only lead to a perpetual collective trauma, preventing the Germans from being, or becoming, a ‘normal’ nation.<sup>448</sup>

The disparaging comparison between the Reich and the EU is not the only embarrassing aspect of the cover image to German eyes. As happened with the first German edition of *MHC*<sup>449</sup> — in which the swastika is exploded to less threatening tri-dimensional blocks scattered in the foreground of an incongruous exotic landscape,<sup>450</sup> to disappear in later editions<sup>451</sup> — the cover of the Haffmans edition was sanitized through the substitution for the swastika of a more neutral symbol: there is one flag raised on top of the Brandenburg Gate instead of the original two, and a synthesis has been realized by picturing a spread eagle inscribed within a circle bordered by the twelve stars of the European flag.<sup>452</sup> The same illustration by John Empton appeared on the cover of the German 1996 edition published by Heyne.<sup>453</sup> In more recent editions, the flag has disappeared altogether.<sup>454</sup> Conversely, on the 2008 Polish edition published by Książnica a huge Iron Cross surmounts the Brandenburg Gate,<sup>455</sup> and an enormous swastika barely fits into the margins of the cover of the first American edition.<sup>456</sup> The original version has not been exempted from the embargo on the public display of Nazi emblems on German soil:

In December 1993, the police authorities in Hamburg confiscated twenty-six copies of the English edition which had been displayed in the windows of a bookstore in the city’s central train station. The copies were returned only after the importer promised that the swastikas would be blackened.<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Fassbender, p. 239.

<sup>449</sup> *Das Orakel vom Berge*, trans. by Heinz Nagel (Munich: König, 1973).

<sup>450</sup> Fig. 2.

<sup>451</sup> Fig. 3 and Fig. 4. The cover by Steven Vincent Johnson (Bergisch Gladbach: Bastei-Lübbe, 1989) depicts an incongruous alien landscape, whereas the edition illustrated by Arndt Drechsler and translated by Norbert Stoebe (Munich: Heyne, 2000) depicts a close-up of the Statue of Liberty sporting a Hitler moustache.

<sup>452</sup> Fig. 6.

<sup>453</sup> Image retrieved from <[http://www.antikbuch24.de/buchdetails\\_1646302.html](http://www.antikbuch24.de/buchdetails_1646302.html)> [accessed 9 November 2008].

<sup>454</sup> Fig. 7.

<sup>455</sup> Fig. 8.

<sup>456</sup> Rosenfeld, 2005, p. 78 Figure 5.

<sup>457</sup> Fassbender, p. 237.

Admittedly, there are also more serious concerns to be reckoned with than the propriety or not of displaying a symbol on the cover of a book:

In addition, some editors undoubtedly thought: Could a book that extends Hitler's rule into the Sixties not be suspected of actually desiring what is described? The editors who rejected the novel for this reason may have felt vindicated by the book's Swiss publisher's recent statement that the German translation was selling especially well in former East Germany where, since reunification, many people openly declare their support for right-wing extremism.<sup>458</sup>

Whereas fanatics will find inspiration in the most disparate sources, allegations of fostering pro-Nazi sentiments would be off the mark in the case of *FL*.

The protagonist, Xavier March, is a solitary, incorruptible police officer with a taste for adventure, a soft spot for dangerous ladies, and here and there a bout of self-irony: 'I am like a movie star, thought March, as he caught the elevator. Everywhere I go, I have two detectives and a brunette in tow' (*FL*, p. 193). He is also endowed with a particularly keen sense of smell. Countless instances thereof could be quoted, a couple will suffice:

He was a connoisseur of this particular rain. He knew the taste of it, the smell of it. It was Baltic rain, from the north, cold and sea-scented, tangy with salt. (*FL*, p. 3)

The corridor was lit like an aquarium. Weak neon bounced off green linoleum and green-washed walls. There was the same smell of polish as in the lobby, but here it was spiced with lavatory disinfectant and stale cigarette smoke. (*FL*, p. 12)

He is also a workaholic, partly for lack of a social life, partly out of a misplaced sense of duty:

Krause shook his head. 'You put in twice the hours of the others. You get no promotions. You're on shitty pay. Are you crazy or what?'

March had rolled the list of missing persons into a tube. He leaned forward and tapped Krause lightly on the chest with it. 'You forget yourself, comrade,' he said. 'Arbeit macht frei.' [...] He turned and made his way back through the ranks of telephonists. Behind him he could hear Krause appealing to Helga. 'See what I mean? What the hell kind of a joke is that?' (*FL*, pp. 19-20)

This is not the only occasion in which the fun he pokes at official rhetoric is lost on others. On surveying his rather unheroic workplace, he comments:

"'The nerve centre in the ceaseless war against the criminal enemies of National Socialism,'" said March, quoting a recent headline in the Party newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*. He paused, and when Jost continued to look blank he explained: 'A joke.'

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<sup>458</sup> Fassbender, p. 238.

‘Sorry?’

‘Forget it.’ (*FL*, p. 12)

Yet March lacks the utter cynicism typical of fictional detectives. The vices he indulges in — alcohol, solitariness, insatiable curiosity, an allergy to rhetoric and conformism — are self-destructive in the sycophantic, opportunistic environment wherein he moves. His keen powers of observation and his inquisitiveness are always mitigated by empathy for the underdogs, for example Jost, the homosexual, intellectual SS cadet who first found the mysterious body. There is even a touch of Franciscan love for all creatures, in March’s fascination for a fleeting encounter with a deer, or in the crumbs of his frugal meal he feeds to the birds on the same occasion (*FL*, p. 78); later, he is explicitly compared to a picture of the martyred Saint Sebastian (*FL*, p. 138); finally, in the hands of his torturers, he becomes a Christ-like figure, betrayed by his friends — nay, by his very son, in probably the most touching moment of the narrative (*FL*, pp. 328-331) — and abandoned by all. Thus, in his novel Harris does not so much offer a ‘de-demonized depiction of Nazi Germany’ as the ‘sympathetic portrait’ of *one* “‘good’ Nazi”,<sup>459</sup> actually a righteous man who just happens to wear a Nazi uniform, and very reluctantly at that: an *ante litteram* Schindler — Harris’ novel and Spielberg’s movie are almost coeval<sup>460</sup> — rather than a substantial revision of the standard negative image of Germans in the more favourable atmosphere created by the prospect of a European Union.

By contrast, other Nazis are portrayed in the narrative in terms that still reflect uncompromising postwar condemnation. Besides the sometime exterminators willing to go all lengths to cover up their crimes, at the moral, even aesthetic opposite to March is situated his colleague Fiebes. Ironically, March is the almost perfect incarnation of the Nordic ideal, according to racial categories made even more disgusting by the row of heads on Fiebes’ desk: ‘white plaster casts with hinged scalps, all raised like lavatory seats, displaying their brains in red and grey sections.’ In contrast, ‘the myopic, stooping,

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<sup>459</sup> Rosenfeld, 2005, p. 80.

<sup>460</sup> *Schindler’s List*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal. 1993.

buck-toothed, cuckolded Fiebes [with] his bat's-wing toupee [...] slightly askew' is one of 'those less confident of their blood-worthiness' who patrol 'the swampy frontiers of the German race':

The knock-kneed Franconian schoolmaster, ridiculous in his Lederhosen; the Bavarian shopkeeper with his pebble glasses; the red-haired Thuringian accountant with a nervous tic and a predilection for the younger members of the Hitler Youth; the lame and the ugly, the runts of the national litter — these were the loudest defenders of the Volk.

Rather than betraying any complacency on the part of the narrator, this description is perfectly in keeping with the traditional indictment of the horror and moral bankruptcy of Nazism, even in 'the permissive 1960s' of Harris' *Indirect Dyschronia* (*FL*, pp. 93-94).

Although it reproduces an actual, pre-Nazi — and still extant — Berlin monument, the cover of *FL* foreshadows perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the novel, the visualization of the unrealized architectural dreams of the Führer:

'Construction of the Arch of Triumph was commenced in 1946 and work was completed in time for the Day of National Reawakening in 1950. The inspiration for the design came from the Führer and is based upon original drawings made by him during the Years of Struggle. [...] The Arch is constructed of granite and has a capacity of two million, three hundred and sixty-five thousand, six hundred and eighty-five cubic metres. [...] The Arc de Triomph in Paris will fit into it forty-nine times.'

For a moment, the Arch loomed over them. Then, suddenly, they were passing through it — an immense, stone-ribbed tunnel, longer than a football pitch, higher than a fifteen-storey building, with the vaulted, shadowed roof of a cathedral. (*FL*, p. 23)

'Leaving the Arch we enter the central section of the Avenue of Victory. The Avenue was designed by Reich Minister Albert Speer and was completed in 1957. It is one hundred and twenty-three metres wide and five-point-six kilometres in length. It is both wider, and two and a half times longer, than the Champs Elysees in Paris.' (*FL*, p. 24)

But the most impressive monument to the Thousand Year Reich that never came to pass would have been the Great Hall of the Reich:

The largest building in the world [...], the Great Hall is used only for the most solemn ceremonies of the German Reich and has a capacity of one hundred and eighty thousand people. [...] It rises to a height of more than a quarter of a kilometre, and on certain days [...] the top of its dome is lost from view. The dome itself is one hundred and forty metres in diameter and St Peter's in Rome will fit into it sixteen times. (*FL*, pp. 27-28)

A blasphemous miniature Olympus of sorts — towering 'like a mountain' in the eyes of an astonished tourist (*FL*, p. 24) — it even conditions the weather, although on a minor scale:

One interesting and unforeseen phenomenon: the breath from this number of humans rises into the cupola and forms clouds, which condense and fall as light rain. The Great Hall is the only building in the world which generates its own climate . . . (FL, p. 28)

In fact, in the victorious Reich religion has been ‘officially discouraged’ (FL, p. 21), and replaced by a pagan personality cult that finds expression in huge gatherings in the presence of the despot and high priest:

‘On the right is the Reich Chancellery and Residence of the Führer. Its total façade measures exactly seven hundred metres, exceeding by one hundred metres the façade of Louis XIV’s palace at Versailles.’

The Chancellery slowly uncoiled as the bus drove by: marble pillars and red mosaics, bronze lions, gilded silhouettes, gothic script — a Chinese dragon of a building, asleep at the side of the square. [...] There were no windows, but set into the wall, five storeys above the ground, was the balcony on which the Führer showed himself on those occasions when a million people gathered in the Platz. There were a few dozen sightseers even now, gazing up at the tightly drawn shutters, faces pale with expectation, hoping... (FL, pp. 28-29)

As the narrator comments: ‘The regime closed churches and compensated by building railway termini to look like cathedrals’ (FL, p. 157). In fact, ‘the monumental in Hitler’s eyes was not only an end result, [...] but also a means by which he could reduce the individual to insignificance’, with the double goal of enhancing conformity and exalting the image of the Supreme Leader.<sup>461</sup> The liturgy also involves minor, personal acts of devotion: ‘March glanced at his son. Pili was transfixed, his little dagger [with a swastika carved on the hilt] clutched tightly in his hand like a crucifix’ (FL, p. 29).

The primary object of worship is, of course, Adolf Hitler himself: ‘When the sun shone the Party called it “Führer weather”. They had no name for rain’ (FL, p. 230).<sup>462</sup> In December 1940, Shirer noted in his *Berlin Diary*:

Today, so far as the vast majority of his fellow countrymen are concerned, he [Hitler] has reached a pinnacle never before achieved by a German ruler. He has become — even before his death — a myth, a legend, almost a god, with that quality of divinity which the Japanese people ascribe to their Emperor. To many Germans he is a figure remote, unreal, hardly human. For them he has become infallible. They say, as many peoples down through history have said of their respective

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<sup>461</sup> James Young, ‘The Terrible Beauty of Nazi Aesthetics: Acknowledging the Role of Art in a Spectacular Act of Barbarism’, *Forward*, 25 April 2003 <<http://www.forward.com/articles/8694/>> [accessed 16 November 2008].

<sup>462</sup> This reminds the author of this study of a conversation he had with Hanny Michaelis, the late Dutch poetess and Holocaust survivor, at her Amsterdam home on 28 June 2000. She recalled going underground at the house of a Protestant family, upright and pious people, but very stern: she was forbidden to speak of ‘bad weather’ because the weather comes from God, therefore it cannot be ‘bad’. But Harris may perfectly well have referred here to some similar joke circulating in the Soviet Union or the DDR, rather than to Hitler’s semi-divine status.

gods: 'He is always right.' [...] The men around him are all loyal, all afraid, and none of them are his friends.<sup>463</sup>

Out of fascination with the *genius loci* of the building — now turned into a girls' school — that once hosted the infamous Wannsee conference at which the Final Solution to the Jewish question was planned, March and Charlie read on blackboards the prayers to the Führer that pupils have to recite before and after meals, thanking him for their daily bread (*FL*, pp. 282-283). This Nazi mockery of the *Paternoster* is also reminiscent of the collective manifestations of quasi-religious rapture during the Two Minutes Hate in 1984:

With a tremulous murmur that sounded like 'My Saviour!' she [the little sandy-haired woman] extended her arms towards the screen. Then she buried her face in her hands. It was apparent that she was uttering a prayer.

At this moment the entire group of people broke into a deep, slow, rhythmical chant of 'B[ig]-B[rother]!...B-B! — over and over again, very slowly, with a long pause between the first 'B' and the second — a heavy, murmurous sound, somehow curiously savage, in the background of which one seemed to hear the stamp of naked feet and the throbbing of tom-toms.<sup>464</sup>

Yet in *FL* the Nazi version of Big Brother only appears in an old photograph that portrays the Führer with the drowned man whose death March is investigating, an old comrade from the failed 1923 putsch and later a State Secretary to the General Government, the rump state carved out from occupied Poland (*FL*, p. 50). The picture makes March's stomach lurch when he finds it among the belongings of the deceased. The date of Hitler's signature, '17 May 1945', would be sufficient proof in itself of the counterhistorical nature of the narrative (*FL*, p. 67).

However, the constant emphasis on the dimensions of the monuments is also the manifestation of a poorly concealed inferiority complex: 'Higher, longer, bigger, wider, more expensive . . . [...] Nothing stood on its own. Everything had to be compared with what the foreigners had' (*FL*, p. 24). There is something slightly reassuring in this patent admission of insecurity, reinforced by the presence of a constant terrorist threat: 'A board announced the current state of terrorist alert. There were four codes, in ascending order of seriousness: green, blue, black and red. Today, as always, the alert was red' (*FL*,

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<sup>463</sup> William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent, 1934-1941* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002; first published 1941), pp. 586-587.

<sup>464</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harlow: Longman, 1983; first published 1949), p. 16.

p. 11). This is obviously a propaganda tool — directing potential resentment against an external enemy and justifying harsh measures — but at once evidence for the relative impotence of the mighty Nazi security apparatus:

Twenty million settlers in the East by 1960, that was Himmler's plan. Ninety million by the end of the century. Fine. Well, we shipped them out all right. Trouble is, half of them want to come back. Consider that cosmic piece of irony, March: living space that no one wants to live in. [...] I don't need to tell an officer of the Kripo how serious terrorism has become. The Americans supply money, weapons, training. They've kept the Reds going for twenty years. As for us: the young don't want to fight and the old don't want to work. (*FL*, p. 233)

As a whole, the image given is that of a regime bent on building endless *autobahnen* leading eastwards and gigantic monuments to its own grandeur — purported or real — rather than laying the entire African continent to waste as it does in *MHC*.

Significantly, the key figure in conferring visible lustre to 'the world's largest city, with its population of 10 million', is Albert Speer, not a raving fanatic but the pragmatic technocrat, and potentially the incarnation of a National Socialism with a human face. In *MHC*, Speer played a positive role in the aftermath of the War in the eyes of the collaborateur Wyndam-Matson:

I'll tell you who really did a good job in the U.S.A., [...] who you can look to for the economic revival. [...] Speer was the best appointment the Partei made in North America; he got all those businesses and corporations and factories — everything! — going again, and on an efficient basis. (*MHC*, p. 69)

Similarly, in 'The Gernsback Continuum' the protagonist/narrator acknowledges 'a kind of sinister totalitarian dignity [in] the stadiums Albert Speer built for Hitler'.<sup>465</sup> Finally, in *FL* Speer is the model for a new generation of party leaders: 'By the 1950s, the beer-hall brawlers had given way to the smooth technocrats of the Speer type — well-groomed university men with bland smiles and hard eyes' (*FL*, p. 89).

Harris does not only provide a description of Nazi architecture but also of the structure of the regime, especially of the proliferation of security forces that ensure its stranglehold on German society, with the ensuing overlappings and conflicts of competence, which the official hierarchy is not able — perhaps not even willing — to prevent: thus, the Orpo [Ordnungspolizei] are 'stuck with tinny Opels', the Kripo

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<sup>465</sup> Gibson, p. 26.

[Kriminal-polizei] March belongs to have average Volkswagens, but the Gestapo at the top of the pecking order drive classy BMWs, ‘sinister boxes with growling, souped-up engines’ (*FL*, p. 125).

The guided tour of Berlin and its monuments undertaken by March and his estranged son Pili is an excuse for providing background information to readers without encumbering or slowing down excessively the narrative account.<sup>466</sup> A similar function is performed by the newspaper read by March (*FL*, pp. 38-39) and by a televised official announcement he attends in the canteen of the police headquarters, in an atmosphere reminiscent of similar communal events in *1984*, for instance the Hate Week:

The new tune which was to be the theme-song of Hate Week (the Hate Song, it was called) had already been composed and was being endlessly plugged on the telescreens. It had a savage, barking rhythm which could not exactly be called music, but resembled the beating of a drum.<sup>467</sup>

There was a roll of drums. The room was still. A newsreader said: ‘We are now going live to the Foreign Ministry in Berlin.’

A bronze relief glittering in the television lights. A Nazi eagle, clutching the globe, shooting rays of illumination, like a child’s drawing of a sunrise. [...]The picture faded to black and another drum roll signalled the start of the national anthem. The men and women in the canteen began to sing. March pictured them at that moment all over Germany — in shipyards and steelworks and offices and schools — the hard voices and the high merged together in one great bellow of acclamation rising to the heavens.

*Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles! Über Alles in der Welt!*

His own lips moved in conformity with the rest, but no sound emerged. (*FL*, pp. 84-85)

March’s dissembling tactic also resembles Winston’s in *1984*:

In the Two Minutes Hate he could not help sharing in the general delirium, but this sub-human chanting of ‘B-B!...B-B!’ always filled him with horror. Of course he chanted with the rest: it was impossible to do otherwise. To dissemble your feelings, to control your face, to do what everyone else was doing, was an instinctive reaction.<sup>468</sup>

Other analogies could be found between *FL* and *1984*. For example, both March and Charlie on the one hand and Winston and Julia on the other hand find a provisional sanctuary for their illicit love. But here the parallel stops; while Winston and Julia’s flimsy hopes collapse in the dreary realization that they have been spied upon all along, March and Charlie’s provisional hideout, offered by a complacent hotelkeeper, is never discovered. In fact, the Nazi regime is a seedbed of corruption, opportunism and

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<sup>466</sup> Confront, in *MHC*, the briefing attended by Tagomi on the possible successors to Bormann as Führer (*MHC*, pp. 92-95).

<sup>467</sup> Orwell, *1984*, pp. 148-149.

<sup>468</sup> Orwell, *1984*, p. 16.

underhand practices, and even the vaunted omnipotence of the Gestapo is delusory, based as it is on fear rather than efficiency. In *1984* O'Brien compounds in one, larger-than-life figure the brutality of the war criminal and SS general Globus, the technocratic sophistication of his younger subordinate Krebs, and the subdued cunning of Nebe, the longtime chief of the Berlin police. Besides, O'Brien is not only able to defeat Winston but also to crush his soul, whereas March never surrenders — and will not die without a fight.

Anticipation triggers in March's mind the recollection of other crucial announcements, concerning the series of *nexus events* that determined the alternative outcome of the war:

Victory over Russia in the spring of '43 — a triumph for the Führer's strategic genius! The Wehrmacht summer offensive of the year before had cut Moscow off from the Caucasus, separating the Red armies from the Baku oilfields. Stalin's war machine had simply ground to a halt for want of fuel.

Peace with the British in '44 — a triumph for the Führer's counter-intelligence genius! March remembered how all U-boats had been recalled to their bases on the Atlantic coast to be equipped with a new cipher system: the treacherous British, they were told, had been reading the Fatherland's codes. Picking off merchant shipping had been easy after that. England was starved into submission. Churchill and his gang of war-mongers had fled to Canada.

Peace with the Americans in '46 — a triumph for the Führer's scientific genius! When America defeated Japan by detonating an atomic bomb, the Führer had sent a V-3 rocket to explode in the skies over New York to prove he could retaliate in kind if struck. After that, the war had dwindled to a series of bloody guerilla conflicts at the fringes of the new German Empire. A nuclear stalemate which the diplomats called the Cold War. (*FL*, p. 83)

One cannot properly speak of second-order counterfactuals in this case, as the events are relatively independent from one another, especially the nullified Allied cracking of the German Enigma secret code (with a substantial contribution from pioneer computer scientists such as Alan Turing), which in real history was of capital importance to the anticipation of the enemy strategy.<sup>469</sup>

Controversial, but also expressive of the *Zeitgeist* of the post Cold War era, is the description of a Nazi regime undoubtedly brutal and oppressive, yet no longer as genocidal as its real history counterpart, or other counterfactual versions. The continuing partisan resistance to German occupation in East Europe is, after all, testimony to a

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<sup>469</sup> The first popular — if not entirely accurate — account of the decryption programme can be found in F.W. Winterbotham, *The Ultra Secret* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974).

relatively more humane treatment of conquered people than in *MHC*. Whereas in Dick's novel 'vicious policies of racial extermination [have been pursued] in Slavic lands in early 'fifties [and only] remnant of Slavic peoples [are tolerated] to exist on reservationlike closed regions in Heartland area' (*MHC*, p. 94), in the world of *FL* cheap foreign labour is widely exploited by German employers:

People *had* grown soft. What else was the point of victory? They had Poles to dig their gardens and Ukrainians to sweep their streets, French chefs to cook their food and English maids to serve it. Having tasted the comforts of peace they had lost their appetite for war. (*FL*, p. 159)

The Reich gone soft in spite of a prolonged state of war in the East bears obvious resemblance to the actual USSR:

Here the author connects the history of the protesting youth in the West of the Sixties with the internal developments of the communist countries, and projects the two chains of events upon his fictitious Germany. His fictional Berlin is not so far from Erich Honecker's Berlin or from Leonid Brezhnev's Moscow.<sup>470</sup>

Nevertheless, the antiwar protesters described in the novel are also reminiscent of their real history counterparts in the West, perhaps more so than any corresponding movement in Eastern Europe, where it no sooner raised its head than it was pitilessly crushed:

There were more of them every day. Rebellng against their parents. Questioning the state. Listening to American radio stations. Circulating their crudely printed copies of proscribed books — Günter Grass and Graham Greene, George Orwell and J. D. Salinger. Chiefly, they protested against the war — the seemingly endless struggle against the American-backed Soviet guerillas, which had been grinding on east of the Urals for twenty years. (*FL*, p. 17)

Besides explaining the international situation for the benefit of readers, this last piece of information could be seen as referring to either the Vietnam or the Afghanistan war, as in real history both superpowers got bogged down in drawn-out guerilla wars in which the rebels were actively supported by the opposite party. While the wars and the resulting defeats brought about, respectively, substantial change and collapse in the societies of the US and the USSR, in the initial quote of *FL* Hitler is reported to have welcomed the prospect of an enduring state of war, on the ill-grounded assumption that this would prevent precisely the kind of bourgeois degeneration of the Ideal that has taken place in *FL*:

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<sup>470</sup> Fassbender, p. 242.

‘People sometimes say to me: “Be careful! You will have twenty years of guerilla warfare on your hands!” I am delighted at the prospect . . . Germany will remain in a state of perpetual alertness.’  
Adolf Hitler 29 August 1942

While acknowledging that *FL* does not indulge in trite stereotypes about the Finest Hour of the British in WWII as opposed to the Germans’ yielding to a gruesome dictatorship, Fassbender takes issue at the “‘message” for our time’ conveyed by the narrative, especially the parallel between the EU and a victorious Reich. Such a critique is perfectly legitimate; but when Fassbender moves to more literary ground his judgement is much more questionable, particularly so when he concludes that because of its present relevance *FL*

does not really belong to the genre of ‘alternative history’ like Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* from 1962, [...] or Len Deighton’s bestseller *SS-GB: Nazi Occupied Britain 1941* from 1979. These books basically put the question of ‘what if’ for the fun of it.<sup>471</sup>

Undoubtedly, a political columnist like Harris is more immediately attuned to the public debate of his time than was a ‘marginal’ author like Dick, who had ‘something about him that was deeply fugitive’ — in the words of Jonathan Lethem, who edited his work for the *Library of America* edition<sup>472</sup> — and, in his allohistorical narrative, still saw a Nazi-dominated world as the epitome of cosmic evil. Nevertheless, presentist concerns are definitely extant in *MHC*; therefore, their presence as opposed to a supposed noncommittal nature of AH is certainly not a valid criterion for generic discrimination: it is absolutely irrelevant whether the author writes AH ‘for the fun of it’ or on a mission for Clio, the muse of History, as long as the story is written as a straightforward historical narrative contradicted by the record. Fassbender is passionate in the defence of his country from the need continually to prove that it has become a worthy democratic partner in the international community, and the brief history of the interim since his article was written has vindicated him. Nevertheless, he admits that ‘the fascinating thing

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<sup>471</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>472</sup> Frank Rose, ‘Philip K. Dick Goes Legit With Library of America Canon’, *Wired*, 15.6 (June 2007) <[http://www.wired.com/print/culture/culturereviews/magazine/15-06/pl\\_print](http://www.wired.com/print/culture/culturereviews/magazine/15-06/pl_print)> [accessed 18 November 2008].

about the book is that it is didactic but still entertaining', thus acknowledging the skill with which Harris presents his argument and deploys his rhetorical weapons.

Harris is certainly no literary innovator, nor is his style particularly sophisticated. If anything, the novel might be found guilty of ransacking all the clichés of hard-boiled detective stories, such as gory details of dead bodies, and the protagonist's long-overdue bills (*FL*, p. 174) and dilapidated living quarters, including the compulsory 'ancient cage lift' perennially 'out of order', the inevitable defective heating, the obligatory room 'filled with salvage from his marriage, still packed in boxes five years later' (*FL*, p. 36). Harris does not even restrain from having his characters allude to an apocryphal exchange between Lady Nancy Astor, the first female MP in the House of Commons, and Winston Churchill. According to one version, she said to him: 'Winston, if I were your wife, I'd poison your soup.' He replied: 'Nancy, if I were your husband, I'd drink it.'<sup>473</sup> In the novel, this is the corresponding exchange between an SS torturer and March: "If you were my dog, I'd feed you poison." "If I were your dog, I'd eat it" (*FL*, p. 339). But no sympathy for the baddies could be traced in the narrative, not even by the most malicious of censors.

Yet it is precisely the commonplace recognisability of his rhetorical strategies that allows Harris to drive his point home to a wide readership, familiar with the language and mechanics of detective thrillers. Just as its noble forefathers in the utopian tradition held a mirror up to the society of their time better to denounce its inadequacies and dangers, so the Indirect Dyschronia of Harris' alternate German-dominated Europe is all the more uncanny because of its familiarity. Skilfully, he does not draw an immediate parallel between present-day Europe and the Reich; rather, he sets the story in the 1960s, at a time when international tensions were higher and relationships between the superpowers oscillated between direct confrontation and appeasement. In fact, the most disturbing aspect is not so much the depiction of a triumphant Nazi regime, but of one it would have been possible, even desirable to come to terms with, slowly evolving

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<sup>473</sup> Reported in John R. Hoyle, *Leadership and Futuring: Making Visions Happen* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2007), p. 51.

toward a more bearable form of authoritarianism, undermined from within by its intrinsic contradictions, youthful unrest and craving for change, and the inevitable softening down that follows every initial revolutionary élan that lives long enough to discover the virtues of pragmatism.

Manifold are the analogies between the actual Communist and the counterfactual Nazi regime. Fear and police control are ubiquitous, and citizens even develop the ‘German look’, a furtive way of turning one’s head slightly, glancing from side to side so as to make sure not to be overheard making potentially compromising statements (*FL*, p. 51). There are ‘thousands of dissidents [...] lock[ed] up in camps’, whereas the few American tourists allowed to visit Berlin are ‘chaperoned around the capital, shown only what the Propaganda Ministry want[s] them to see’ (*FL*, p. 115), and their telephone lines are routinely tapped (*FL*, p. 170). Trying to defect is ‘the unmentionable act’ (*FL*, p. 183), but probably a widespread temptation nonetheless, since travel abroad is strictly regulated, and the duration of a visa is ‘in direct ratio to the applicant’s political reliability’; needless to say, March is given a twenty-four-hour visa, ‘a day-pass to the outside world’, which reflects his downwards parable, plunging him ‘down there among the Untouchables of society — the grumblers, the parasites, the work-shy, the crypto-criminal’ (*FL*, p. 180). Jeans are evidently as hard to find — and probably as subject to black market circulation — as in the actual USSR, since on seeing female students wearing them March wonders where they got them (*FL*, p. 150). Photocopiers are also ‘a rare sight’, as they might be used for the production of illegal literature (*FL*, p. 238). But subversives find other, creative ways to propagate their ideas and discredit the regime: for example, a piece of graffiti on a wall in the days leading to Hitler’s birthday, proclaiming that ‘anyone found not enjoying themselves will be shot’ (*FL*, p. 230).

At this point, the parallel becomes more uncomfortable — and therefore more controversial — precisely because it is more plausible. In fact, the juxtaposition of the dynamics of aging Nazi and Soviet societies enraged German critics for the same reasons it pleased Anglo-American ones: it unsettled the former’s strategy of removal of the

horrors of Nazism as a gruesome but definitively closed chapter of the country's history, whereas it pandered to the latter's faith in the superiority of democracy and its ability to conquer any authoritarian opponent in the long run by the sheer force of example and the promise of a better life for the subjects of despotic regimes.

The clash is between two opposite ideas of Nazism as either belonging with the long series of authoritarian regimes that rose to power in many countries during the twentieth century or, rather, being the expression of a typically German talent for blind obedience to authority that finds expression in the Luther-to-Hitler tradition. Not incidentally, the latter was the same argument underlying Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, which was fiercely attacked — mostly by German critics — for the same reasons, that is, for continually throwing the errors of the past in the face of a country that was trying as best it could to cope with its shameful memories.<sup>474</sup>

Also controversial is the implication that the Nazi regime was not so exceptional after all and, if it had survived the war, it would have followed in the steps of its Soviet counterpart, resisting at first, but then forcibly accepting the changes that its inexorable devolution — and the international situation — would require, especially after the demise of the ruthlessly despotic generation of leaders that had ruled the system in wartime. Another disturbing implication is that Realpolitik considerations would have led Western democracies to adopt a policy of more or less overt appeasement in the face of an authoritarianism they felt they had to come to terms with, much as they did with the Soviet system.

The hypothesis is supported by epistemological as well as ontological considerations. More explicitly than was already the case with *MHC* — in which the ultimate unknowability of the world as such was paramount — the protagonists are involved in a quest for truth about a past that, much like in real history, is still holding a country in its thrall and preventing the adoption of a new, more humane policy, unencumbered by the poisonous legacy of the criminal decisions made by its leaders

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<sup>474</sup> See Rosenfeld, 1994.

during the war — and their personal liability for them. The uncomfortable — but hardly refutable — assumption is that the international community would have condoned Nazi crimes for the sake of peace and understanding, much as Soviet crimes were forgotten or even blamed on the Nazis: see for example the Katyn massacre of Polish officers, long thought to have been a Nazi crime before the evidence showed that Stalin was responsible for it (*FL*, p. 205). Thus, Harris' alternate forecast may have been too optimistic:

I don't think that in the long run the Nazi state could have survived the revelations about the Holocaust, and it wouldn't have been possible for any American President to deal with them. The regime would have collapsed from internal pressures, just as the Soviet Union did.<sup>475</sup>

In real history, neither the belated disclosure of Stalin's crimes nor the ongoing persecution of dissidents did prevent the West from entertaining with the Soviet block relationships whose nature and level were apparently conditioned by a pragmatic rather than ethical agenda. Generally speaking, more often than not the appalling human rights record of dictatorships worldwide has not substantially affected their diplomatic and — especially — economic status. Moreover, some regimes have shown amazing powers of adaption to altered international circumstances without seriously questioning their nature. In the end, it cannot be excluded that, with a Nazi regime victorious in the war and still steady in its power, the Holocaust might have been one more genocide whose perpetrators were never brought to justice.

Be that as it may, Harris denied that his novel expressed an anti-German stance. Rather, he insisted that his was a realistic view on the uncomfortable resurfacing of the tendency to German hegemony in Europe, although not in the same forms as in the recent, tragic past:

Without being anti-German in pointing this out, Germany, 50 years after the war, is emerging with many of Hitler's war aims coming true. I take it with equanimity. [...] I don't mean to suggest that Europe now is as it would have been if the Nazis had won [...]. But in 1942, the Germans did think of founding a European Economic Community, with a European central bank which Hitler wanted to base in Berlin. Now Chancellor Kohl wants to base it in Frankfurt. We're now seeing Berlin emerging as the capital again, and it will be the hub city of Europe. We've seen

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<sup>475</sup> Robert Harris, quoted in Craig R. Whitney, 'Inventing a World in Which Hitler Won', *New York Times*, 3 June 1992.

Eastern Europe collapse, and the Slavic people reduced to a state of penury, which Hitler intended. There's a power vacuum in Europe, and the Germans will find themselves forced to fill it whether they want to or not.<sup>476</sup>

In *FL*, the superiority of the Reich is tangible in the image of the European Parliament building, on top of which the Nazi flag dwarfs all the others (*FL*, pp. 104-105).

The analogies between the counterfactual Reich and the actual EU are in fact numerous, starting from the cover image. The Reichsmark is the common European currency, just as the Deutsche Mark seemed poised to be before the introduction of the Euro (*FL*, p. 193). Whereas the Greater German Reich has acquired its Lebensraum in Central and Eastern Europe, twelve Western countries have been 'corralled [...], under the Rome Treaty, into a European trading bloc', and German is the official second language in all schools (*FL*, p. 196). Even the double queue at the passport control in airports — 'one for German and European Community nationals, one for the rest of the world' (*FL*, p. 228) — functions exactly as under the Schengen Agreement. But the degree of autonomy enjoyed by member states other than Germany is relative: 'The British, French and Italians will do what we tell them', as Nebe tells March to warn him against trying to defect while on a mission abroad (*FL*, p. 180). In a sacrilegious glimpse of an England under the Nazi heel that is reminiscent of other AH dealing with Nazi victory<sup>477</sup> — and of Gibbon's counterfactual Oxford propagating the Verb of Islam — Oxford is now the seat of an SS academy (*FL*, p. 177).

Whereas Harris rightly argued that one does not have to be a Thatcherite in order to worry about a European Union ruled by a reunified Germany,<sup>478</sup> his predictions are somewhat contradictory, or perhaps mutually mitigating, as a Soviet-style Reich would have had the brutal force to impose his economic supremacy, but not the efficiency

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<sup>476</sup> Whitney. These remarks are probably based on the same real-history wartime plans for German economic supremacy mentioned in Roberts and Ferguson's HC about a Nazi invasion of Britain: see Ferguson, pp. 317-318. Roberts' unequivocal Euroscepticism also found expression in his futuristic thriller *The Aachen Memorandum* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), a scathing critique of 'the corrupt, bureaucratic, xenophobic Euro-superstate that has all but snuffed out British identity', in the words of the author's website: <[http://www.andrew-roberts.net/pages/books/the\\_aachen\\_memorandum.asp](http://www.andrew-roberts.net/pages/books/the_aachen_memorandum.asp)> [accessed 16 November 2008].

<sup>477</sup> See for example Len Deighton, *SS-GB: Nazi-occupied Britain* (London: Cape, 1978).

<sup>478</sup> Rosenfeld, 2005, p. 423 Note 187.

necessary to maintain it in the long run. The bureaucratic, fear-induced apathy of all Germans in *FL* may thus have found its actualization in the enduring difficulty of integrating the former *Ossi* citizens of the DDR into the more competitive society of the West: ‘After thirty years of being told what to do, the average German was careful not to take final responsibility for anything, even for not opening a door’ (*FL*, p. 108).<sup>479</sup> In the end, the new Germany cannot and will not be confined to the backstage of the continent, but neither can it perform the roles of the Totalitarian Ogre and of the Big Capitalist Wolf at once, as it does to a certain extent in the narrative, where German-based multinational industrial concerns rule the economy as they did in *MHC* (*FL*, p. 211).

By following the counterfactual premises of the narrative well beyond the initial nexus event, Harris draws and fleshes out the convincing — if controversial — image of a socio-political as well as urban landscape. Far from the emphasis on the monumental of Harris’ counterfactual Berlin, in *MHC* the focus is on relatively few characters moving in a mostly nondescript environment that functions as a backdrop for the action — not incidentally, one of the most detailed scenes is Tagomi’s vision of an America alternative to the one he inhabits — save for a few highly evocative objects, for example the relics from the American past and Frink’s jewelry, which ‘represent the insignificant made significant, the small made potentially great’:

There is [...] in his [Dick’s] writing a counter-impulse to take the trash, the clutter and kitsch of our everyday world and play with it, render it imaginatively meaningful, to make the inconsequential rubble artfully bloom with possibilities out of the humanly creative mind, and, finally, to use the seeming triviality of small things in order to resist the impulse toward extraordinary power or absolute control so often found in Dick’s fiction.<sup>480</sup>

In contrast, the narrative world of *FL* is fully fledged, with a wide array of individuals and objects sharply defined and painstakingly filtered and described through a detective’s eye. Therefore, observation is never an end in itself; as much as the detailed description of an alternate postwar Berlin shows the author’s diligent documentation

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<sup>479</sup> Even the terror struck in the hearts of ordinary citizens when in the vicinity of the Gestapo headquarters is suggestive of similar anecdotes about Muscovites choosing the opposite pavement when walking by the *Lubyanka* KGB headquarters and prison (*FL*, p. 128).

<sup>480</sup> John L. Simons, ‘The Power of Small Things in Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle*’, *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 39.4 (1985), 261-275 (p. 262).

work — and, possibly, his initial intention of writing ‘a sort of travel guide to victorious Germany’<sup>481</sup> — *FL* is first and foremost a detective story, and its protagonist investigates what starts as an ordinary murder mystery but turns out to be no less than the Crime of the Century, the Holocaust.

Although the surviving members of the regime who had been involved in the decision-making process that led to the Final Solution apparently do not feel that their hold on power is vanishing so that they could soon be called to account, the exigency of such a sustained cover-up operation after many years, with the war won and no end to the Reich in sight, is justified by the enormous size of the crime itself. As Hitler himself is reported to have said, ‘FOR ANY NATION THE RIGHT HISTORY IS WORTH 100 DIVISIONS’, (*FL*, p. 234). Which echoes the Party slogan in *1984*: ‘Who controls the past [...] controls the future: who controls the present controls the past’<sup>482</sup> — a hymn to perpetual revisionism.

Besides all the examples that reality could provide us with, the rewriting of history to suit the needs of a totalitarian regime and cover up its crimes is certainly no narrative invention of Harris’. In *1984*, the alteration of the record is a ceaseless process as deeply ingrained in the nature of the dictatorship, which aims at total control of the hearts and minds of its subjects, as it is made necessary by the shameless substitution for reality of its opposite. ‘Doublethink also lies behind the names of the superministries which run things in Oceania — the Ministry of Peace wages war, the Ministry of Truth [for which the protagonist works] tells lies’:<sup>483</sup>

Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date. In this way every prediction made by the Party could be shown by documentary evidence to have been correct, nor was any item of news, or any expression of opinion, which conflicted with the needs of the moment, ever allowed to remain on record. All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary. In no case would it have been possible, once the deed was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Sara Anelli, ‘Counterfactual Holocausts: Robert Harris’ *Fatherland* and Martin Amis’ *Time’s Arrow*’, *Textus*, 20.2 (May-August 2007), 407-432 (p. 414).

<sup>482</sup> Orwell, *1984*, p. 34.

<sup>483</sup> Thomas Pynchon, ‘The road to *1984*’, *Guardian*, 3 May 2003.

<sup>484</sup> Orwell, *1984*, pp. 39-40.

What Winston contributes to create is thus an endless series of *alternate histories*, each suppressing its antecedent. What is not in the record did not exist, and, if narratives are the way humanity makes sense of the past, what cannot be told never happened in the first place.

Although less sophisticated in its manipulation of the record than was its possible future counterpart in *1984* — by now, an alternate past — the Nazi 1964 also has a place ‘where the wrong history goes’ (*FL*, p. 238): it is the huge archive where March and his friend, the historian Rudi Halder, search for the truth, and the regime keeps — until their destruction in a furnace — those documents that would make it possible to write ‘*ein niemals geschriebenes und niemals zu schreibendes Ruhmesblatt unserer Geschichte*’, that ‘glorious page in our history which has never been written and never will be written’, as Himmler referred to the Holocaust in an infamous speech to the SS at Posen in 1943.<sup>485</sup>

Throughout his investigation, March scrupulously follows logical-deductive procedures that will make it possible for him to discover ‘connections, strategies, causes and effects’ (*FL*, p. 310), as in the examination of the wartime timetable of the railway connections between occupied cities and extermination camps that gives him an approximate estimate of the size of the massacre (*FL*, pp. 304-307). For detectives and historians alike, ‘compiling a chronology [is] a favourite tool [...], a method of finding a pattern in what seemed otherwise to be a fog of random facts’ (*FL*, p. 90).

The same also applies to novelists, although the latter enjoy a higher degree of freedom in devising the missing links in their causal chains, even when dealing with actual facts. For example, one of the nexus events in the novel does not concern the overall course of WWII but the destiny of one powerful individual. Instead of being assassinated by Czech agents in 1942, Reinhard Heydrich survives and is still at the head

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<sup>485</sup> Quoted in Gabrielle M. Spiegel, ‘Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time’, *History and Theory*, 41. 2 (May 2002), 149-162 (p. 156 Note 19). See also Peter Haidu, ‘The Dialectics of Unspeakability: Language, Silence, and the Narratives of Desubjectification’, in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 277-299 (p. 286). Himmler’s speech is also quoted in *FL* (p. 255).

of the security forces of the Reich in the 1964 of the alternative timeline (*FL*, p. 224). Although he never appears directly in the narrative, this is particularly convenient for the plot: since he chaired the Wannsee conference, he has a personal interest in covering up the ensuing extermination of European Jews.

Thus history is altered, in the overall picture as well as in the details, if and only when the narrative requires so, and Harris has accounted for the divergent fate of historical individuals since 1942 in the Author's Note appended to the novel, also specifying which of the documents quoted in the text are authentic (*FL*, pp. 371-372). In motivating his occasional doing otherwise, Harris provides, in a nutshell, a possible poetics for AH, or for any historical fiction that does not wish to take too many postmodern liberties with its matter: 'Where I have created documents, I have tried to do so on the basis of fact'.

By contrast, some elements from real history have been preserved in the altered circumstances. The student resistance movement of the White Rose, ruthlessly crushed during the war, makes an improbable comeback (*FL*, pp. 150 and 174) in a country where the Night and Fog decree of 1941 authorizing the extrajudicial abduction and execution of any alleged enemy of the Nazi state is still in force (*FL*, p. 79). On the other hand, a well-delivered *clin d'œil au lecteur* is 'a piece by the music critic [of the *Berliner Tageblatt*] attacking the "pernicious, Negroid wailings" of a group of young Englishmen from Liverpool, playing to packed audiences of German youth in Hamburg' (*FL*, p. 38). A Beatles song is also playing on the radio of a Zurich taxi broadcasting the *Voice of America* station, forbidden in the Reich as it was in the USSR (*FL*, p. 193).]

Just as any investigation, March's quest relies on the discovery of evidence, of records documenting what happened to the millions of Jews who had been 'evacuated to the east' during the war, never to be heard of again. Macrocosm and microcosm, public and private history intertwine in the fate of the former Jewish tenants of March's flat, the Weisses: 'They had vanished. *Weiss. White. A blank*' (*FL*, p. 37). The records concerning the victims, the millions as well as the individuals, have been carefully removed. The

victors wrote the history, thus fulfilling the dreadful prophecy of an SS officer, reported by Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*:

However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world would not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed: they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the Lagers. (*FL*, p. 317)

As Winston commented, when confronted with the systematic falsification of history: ‘If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, *it never happened* — that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death?’<sup>486</sup>

All the material evidence March is left with are minute traces, poor relics of a tragedy beyond proportion, even beyond belief: a family photograph of the Weisses, a brick dug up from the site where once Auschwitz stood.

And then he saw it. Almost buried at the base of a sapling: a streak of red. He bent and picked it up, turned it over in his hand. The brick was pitted with yellow lichen, scorched by explosive, crumbling at the corners. But it was solid enough. It existed. He scraped at the lichen with his thumb and the carmine dust crusted beneath his fingernail like dried blood. As he stooped to replace it, he saw others, half-hidden in the pale grass — ten, twenty, a hundred . . . (*FL*, p. 368)

One of the SS officers involved in the cover-up of the Holocaust had dared him to find ‘even a brick’ there: ‘Nobody will ever believe it. And shall I tell you something? *Part of you can’t believe it either*’ (*FL*, p. 350).

Although March does find at last a hoard of documentary evidence of the Holocaust, there is no happy ending, no reassuring justice delivered, not even the certainty that the protagonist’s sacrifice will not have been vain. March is overtaken by his pursuers, whom he has put on a false track in the attempt to win time for Charlie, the female American journalist he has had an affair with and entrusted with the evidence that should avert the scheduled summit — and the ensuing détente — between the Nazi government and the US administration led by the wrong Kennedy, Joseph, father of J.F.K. and a long-time appeaser: among the authentic documents reproduced in the narrative are secret dispatches from the German Ambassador in London referring to

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<sup>486</sup> Orwell, *1984*, p. 34.

prewar conversations with his colleague Joseph P. Kennedy, in which the latter manifested his pro-German and anti-Semitic sentiments (*FL*, pp. 299-300).

The ending is just as inconclusive as that of *MHC* had been; preparing himself for a desperate last stand, March will never know whether Charlie has reached Switzerland and safety, nor whether the documents she is carrying will make any real difference in American public opinion and policy toward Nazi Germany, thus far quite indifferent to the lot of Jews during the war:

They [the few Holocaust survivors] talk about execution pits, medical experiments, camps that people went into but never came out of. They talk about millions of dead. But then the German ambassador comes along in his smart suit and tells everyone it's all just communist propaganda. So nobody knows what's true and what isn't. And I'll tell you something else — most people don't care. (*FL*, p. 204)

Similar reservations are expressed by the American diplomat Nightingale, alongside his doubts at the prospect of offering asylum to one of the last survivors among those who attended the Wannsee conference:

They'll say: what's he got that's new? The same old story we've heard for twenty years, plus a few documents, probably forged by the communists. Kennedy'll go on TV and he'll say 'My fellow Americans, ask yourselves: why has all this come up now? In whose interest is it to disrupt the summit?' (*FL*, p. 266-267)

By contrast, Charlie believes that the availability of hard, undeniable facts will make a crucial difference to the free and critical Western public opinion:

Facts changed everything. Without them, you had nothing, a void. But produce facts — provide names, dates, orders, numbers, times, locations, map references, schedules, photographs, diagrams, descriptions — and suddenly that void had geometry, was susceptible to measurement, had become a solid thing. (*FL*, p. 322)

But even the idealist Charlie has to admit that judgements about facts will vary according to the circumstances: 'Wartime is different. All countries do wicked things in wartime. My country dropped an atom bomb on Japanese civilians — killed a quarter of a million people in an instant' (*FL*, p. 205). Thus, not only the truth about facts but also their moral dimension may disappear 'into what Karl von Clausewitz so eloquently called "the fog of war"' (*FL*, p. 268), or be sacrificed to *Realpolitik* exigencies. Based on the hindsight bias produced by the fate of dictatorial regimes in Eastern Europe, Charlie's prediction that 'five years from now, or fifty years, this society will fall apart

[because] you can't build on a mass grave' may still prove wrong (*FL*, p. 323). As March reminds an SS officer, the fate of the Jews was as much of an open secret in the alternate Germany of the Sixties as it was in the actual Germany of the early Forties, both peopled by many *willing executioners*:<sup>487</sup>

'Of course you knew! You knew every time someone made a joke about "going East", every time you heard a mother tell her child to behave or they'd go up the chimney. We knew when we moved into their houses, when we took over their property, their jobs. We knew but we didn't have the facts.' He pointed to the notes with his left hand. 'Those put flesh on the bones. Put bones where there was just clear air.' (*FL*, p. 344)

But the end of the novel leaves it undecided whether those facts will reach public knowledge in the first place, and, if so, whether they will suffice to give to that airy nothing a local habitation and a name. Even in the real world, it is still a moot issue whether an aseptic, neutral description of the facts will convey the memory of the Holocaust with more truth and propriety than can do the work of the imagination.

An eloquent symbol for the absurdity of Nazism that cannot be adequately described through realistic conventions is the distorted palette typical of both children's and *degenerate* art, with their 'blue meadows, green skies, [and] clouds of sulphur-yellow' (*FL*, p. 283), condemned as either delusion or deception by Hitler himself (*FL*, p. 272). But, when he has reached the site where once Auschwitz stood, March discovers that, after all, there is no appropriate depiction of the enormity of what happened outside the visionary innocence of a child or artist: 'The sky really was a sulphur-yellow, the sun an orange disc in the smog' (*FL*, p. 366).

Thus, notwithstanding all its meticulous, detective-story-like reconstruction based on the analysis of real or realistic documents and facts, the novel may contain an interpretive core that overcomes the limitations of realistic representation of the Holocaust through a kind of *Traumatic Realism*, as does Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which also relies — significantly enough — on modes of expressions traditionally associated

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<sup>487</sup> See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Little, Brown, 1996).

with a childish or low-brow readership: the comic book and the animal fable.<sup>488</sup> Traditionally, but wrongly: while the *graphic novel* has developed into a form of art in its own right, the animal fable has always been a vehicle for sharp social satire and moral critique, from Aesop through the medieval *Reynard the Fox* to Orwell's *Animal Farm*. It is as if the novel implicitly acknowledged its inadequacy to convey the sense — if any — of the tragedy it tries to reconstruct, its inability — or unwillingness — to go beyond the necessary but limited fact-checking.

However, the two modes of representations may no longer need to be considered as mutually exclusive, some decades after Adorno's famous *dictum* against the aestheticization of the Holocaust.<sup>489</sup> Both the respectful examination and reproduction of documental and material evidence and an act of creative imagination might be necessary, complementing rather than excluding each other. Thus the altered, unnatural colours signal that something is fundamentally amiss in the landscape, and March's mother may have been more perceptive than her sceptical son, when she claimed that 'brickwork and plaster soaked up history, stored what they had witnessed, like a sponge' (*FL*, p. 284). Both do essential work, the historian who digs up the brick and the poet whose eye, in fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven, and gives voice to the people who lived and died in the place where the brick once stood. Far from being uncalled for, writing 'poetry after Auschwitz' — in whatever form — may constitute a moral duty, and even the artificially extended lease on life given by AH to the regime that perpetrated that crime can contribute to the memory and vindication of

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<sup>488</sup> Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon, 1986). See also Anelli, p. 410, and Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>489</sup> Anelli, pp. 408-409. See also Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967).

the victims by offsetting ‘the immemoriality of the Shoah [that] has entered European culture’.<sup>490</sup>

For whether we like it or not, the predominant vehicles of public memory *are* the media of technical re/production and mass consumption’, [and] treating the opposition of *Shoah* versus *Schindler’s List* as if it were a practical alternative, a real option, [...] is beside the point.<sup>491</sup>

This is particularly true since the paucity of Holocaust survivors has made it necessary from the start to rely on ‘prosthetic’ — or mass-mediated — forms of memory.<sup>492</sup> Highly popular narratives of the Holocaust such as *FL* can therefore serve the cause of memory as well as does the indispensable work of historians. March functions as alter ego for the author not only because at one point he is scornfully referred to as a ‘frustrated fucking author’ (*FL*, p. 339), but also in that he admits his limitations in being only able to find facts and dispose them in a meaningful order, whereas actually changing history is beyond his powers (*FL*, p. 325). However, ‘the mixture in this novel of high and low categories, of dystopian form with political thriller, is a provocative means of attempting to portray the timelessness of “forgetting the forgotten”’.<sup>493</sup>

But the argument — itself not entirely free of false pathos — that the attempt to imagine the annihilation aesthetically should therefore be discontinued altogether is [...] misguided, directed as it is against legitimate claims to expression. The desire to establish a normative aesthetics of content from an objective social limit is an authoritarian longing; rather — and above all — we should investigate how this limit is reflected and re-marked in art itself. What nonetheless constitutes the *skandalon*, as the irreducible condition of the aesthetic, is the pleasure contained even in the most resistant work of art — a pleasure culled from the transformation into the imaginary that enables distance, the coldness of contemplation.<sup>494</sup>

One should not too hastily slight a novel like *FL* for its ‘aesthetic populism, [...] the [typically postmodern] effacement [...] of the older [essentially high-modernist]

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<sup>490</sup> Ann Parry, ‘Idioms for the Unrepresentable: Post-War Fiction and the Shoah’, *Journal of European Studies*, 27.4 (December 1997), *Academic OneFile*. Gale <[http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=AONE&docId=A20816373&source=gale&srprod=AONE&userGroupName=mml\\_b\\_bumml&version=1.0](http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=AONE&docId=A20816373&source=gale&srprod=AONE&userGroupName=mml_b_bumml&version=1.0)> [accessed 6 November 2008].

<sup>491</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘*Schindler’s List* Is Not *Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory’, *Critical Inquiry*, 22.2 (Winter 1996), 292-312 (p. 310).

<sup>492</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>493</sup> Parry.

<sup>494</sup> Gertrud Koch, ‘The Aesthetic Transformation of the Image of the Unimaginable: Notes on Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*’, trans. by Jamie Owen Daniel and Miriam Hansen, *October*, 48 (Spring 1989), 15-24 (p. 20).

frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture'.<sup>495</sup> Not only is a popularized and mediatized memory better than no memory at all, but, more importantly still, aestheticization may reveal itself to be an adequate form of representation and catharsis for the horror of the Holocaust as it has been for other unspeakable, unconceivable horrors from the birth of tragedy onwards.

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<sup>495</sup> Jameson, p. 2.

### 3. Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*: Alternate History or Postmodern Divertissement?

Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous.  
(*Richard III*, I. 1. TLN 33)

*TPAA* is based on the counterfactual premise of the victory, in the 1940 US presidential election, of Charles Lindbergh, the former aviation hero, chosen for his isolationist, pro-Nazi stance summarized in the slogan ‘Vote for Lindbergh or vote for War’, which is also the title of the first chapter (*TPAA*, pp. 1-43); his election unleashes growing discrimination and persecution against American Jews — singled out as the warmongers who would thrust the nation into a bloody conflict against its own interest — involving progressive harassment, dismembering of Jewish communities, and deportation westwards of their members, and culminating in *Kristallnacht*-like pogroms.

The title of the whole novel is suggestive enough, with its evocation of a conspiracy endangering the fate of a whole nation — and of the mystery involved. The title has also inspired that of this study, for both practical and analytical reasons. It is a golden rule that the title of a scientific work should not stray exceedingly from its subject matter; in this case, two out of three content words replicate the title of one of the major works analyzed, which is definitely convenient in this age of keyword searches. Moreover, the semantic ambiguity of *against* could yield two complementary readings: the more conventional ‘in opposition or hostility to’, meaning that someone — in this case, the AH writers — has been plotting against the past by replacing it with a counterfeit version; the less immediate reading ‘compared or contrasted with’, meaning that *every* plot should be seen as fundamentally different from the past it tries to reproduce, even when the writer purports to give a straightforward account of the events. In the latter sense, *all* narrative, whether factual or fictional, is a layer of superimposed meaning through which the *real* past emerges — if at all — as a palimpsest.

The cover image<sup>496</sup> is no less commonplace than the suggestions in the title, but perhaps more successfully evocative; besides referring to one of the young protagonist's nightmares (*TPAA*, pp. 41-43), the swastika superimposed on what would otherwise be a perfectly normal US Mail stamp anticipates both the child's habit of collecting stamps and the immediate perception, on reading the first pages, that history itself has run amok, that there is something rotten in the state of America. In contrast, on the cover of the German translation<sup>497</sup> the swastika has been replaced by a more neutral cross.<sup>498</sup> This should come as no surprise, given the examples of the German editions of *MHC* and *FL* and, more generally, the severity of the German law forbidding use of Nazi symbols, sometimes even when the purpose is clearly anti-Nazi.<sup>499</sup> Whether approved or even inspired by the author or not, the cover design of *TPAA* is not a remarkable exception to a sobriety and anonymity rule:

Alternate histories lend themselves almost uniquely well to what publishers call 'high concept'. The central idea behind most alternate histories is so straightforward as to be iconic — sometimes conveyed in the title, but often reducible to a single image, which publishers have been happy to employ.

Remarkably, an earlier case in point, the dust jacket for Len Deighton's 1978 *SS-GB*, showed, 'with perfect economy and clarity, a British postage stamp with Hitler's visage upon it, postmarked late 1941'.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> Fig. 9. See also Rosenfeld, 2005, p. 153 Figure 12.

<sup>497</sup> *Verschwörung gegen Amerika*, trans. by Werner Schmitz (Munich: Hanser, 2005).

<sup>498</sup> Fig. 10.

<sup>499</sup> DW staff (jb), 'German Company Fined for Selling Anti-Nazi Symbols', *Deutsche Welle*, 29 September 2006 <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2189625,00.html>> [accessed 3 September 2008].

<sup>500</sup> Feeley.

### 3.1. Yet another Yid Kid's Memories: Antecedents in Roth's Narrative

Ah, but I was so much older then,  
I'm younger than that now.  
(Bob Dylan, 'My Back Pages')

I, David Alan Kepesh, also known to my readers as Philip Roth, hereby acknowledge, after all my unsuccessful attempts to prove otherwise, that nothing interests me enough to write well about it except my own self and whatever directly impinges on me.  
(Philip Roth)<sup>501</sup>

Like many a Roth statement — especially if expressed in his fiction — this tongue-in-cheek confession should not be taken at face value. Yet it may contain a kernel of truth in that, generally speaking, Roth appears more at ease with the personal lives of himself and his immediate circle — however fictionalized — than with the larger historical picture. As he wrote once about his father: 'His repertoire has never been large: family, family, family, Newark, Newark, Newark, Jew, Jew, Jew. Somewhat like mine.'<sup>502</sup> There is therefore more than mere paradox to the contention that in *TPAA* the child-protagonist's 'fear of being locked in a neighbor's bathroom [is] a set-piece that manages to be more breathless than the later pogrom scenes'.<sup>503</sup>

Childhood memories resurface frequently in Roth's narrative, with the same elements reworked and rearranged over and over again, as in the case of the exceptionality of long-distance phone calls in the US of the early 1940s, dramatically exploited in the desperate conversation between Seldon, the little neighbour stranded in rural Kentucky (the one Philip will end up having to take care of at the end of the novel) and Philip's mother in *TPAA* (pp. 329-333); in contrast, the expensiveness of long-distance calls is cunningly defused by Philip's family in *Operation Shylock* [hereafter: *OS*],<sup>504</sup> as he recalls the trick they used to play on the phone company operator by asking

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<sup>501</sup> Quoted in Hillel Halkin, 'How to Read Philip Roth', *Commentary*, 97.2 (February 1994), 43-48 (p. 45).

<sup>502</sup> Philip Roth, *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (New York: Penguin, 1988), p.16.

<sup>503</sup> Ross Douthat, 'It Didn't Happen Here', *Policy Review*, 129 (February-March 2005), 73-78 (p. 74).

<sup>504</sup> Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993). Page numbers have been inserted parenthetically in the text.

to speak person-to-person with a nonexistent ‘Moishe Pipik’, thus surreptitiously conveying the coded tidings of their safely getting back home after their visit to the apprehensive grandmother, who invariably answered that Pipik had left half an hour before (*OS*, pp. 183-184).

Unsurprisingly for two novels which share the same autobiographic slant, there are many similarities between the family characters in both *TPAA* and *Portnoy’s Complaint* [hereafter: *PC*] on the one hand,<sup>505</sup> and their real life counterparts on the other hand. For example, both Philip Roth’s and Alex Portnoy’s fathers work with an insurance company (*PC*, p. 6). Both work hard, as did Roth’s father in real life<sup>506</sup> — to four-year-old Alex, his father is ‘a man who lives with us at night and on Sunday afternoons’ (*PC*, p. 45) — but have their ambitions about a career (and a more affluent life) thwarted by their lack of education and their being Jews (*PC*, pp. 7-8); at most,

in the fullness of their benevolence, they sent him and my mother for a hotsy-totsy free weekend in Atlantic, to a fancy *goyische* hotel no less, there [...] to be intimidated by the desk clerk, the waiter, the bellboy, not to mention the puzzled paying guests. (*PC*, p. 6)

This is akin to what Philip’s family will experience during their trip to Washington, although in a much more ominous atmosphere.

Whereas in *TPAA* the anti-Semitic threat is paramount, and even the relative safety of the family’s mostly Jewish Newark neighbourhood is at a certain point threatened with the eventuality of pogroms, Alex’s family move to Newark ‘from New York City because of the anti-Semitism’ (*PC*, p. 52). Another episode which is similar in both novels is the unpleasant meeting with the pro-Nazi German-American Bund (*TPAA*, pp. 9-10), whose members ‘used to hold their picnics in a beer garden only blocks from our house. When we drove by in the car on Sundays, my father would curse them, loud enough for me to hear, not quite loud enough for them to hear’ (*PC*, p. 52).

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<sup>505</sup> Philip Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969). Page numbers have been inserted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>506</sup> Roth, *The Facts*, p. 11.

Notwithstanding Jack's prudence, so discordant with Philip's father's 'loudmouth Jew' attitude,<sup>507</sup> 'one night a swastika was painted on the front of our building. Then a swastika was found carved into the desk of one of the Jewish children in Hanna's class' (*PC*, p. 52). At that point, the family is persuaded to move by well-to-do, patronizing Uncle Hymie, 'the potent man in the family — successful in business, tyrannical at home' (*PC*, p. 51), and reminiscent of uncle Monty, 'the most overbearing of my [Philip's] uncles, which probably accounted for why he was also the richest' (*TPAA*, p. 122). Mirroring the character of cousin Alvin in *TPAA* is Hymie's son Heshie. Both are the young boy-protagonist's heroes. Both go to war. But, while Alvin returns with an artificial leg poorly fitted to his stump, Heshie dies (*PC*, p. 59). And while in *TPAA* cousin Alvin has a dramatic and violent confrontation with Philip's father, in *PC* the fight takes place between Heshie and his father (*PC*, p. 58).

However, all these events are allotted much less space in his recollections by self-obsessed Alex than are the corresponding episodes by Philip: this is also justified by the different scope of the narratives, *PC* sweeping through most of Alex's life, while *TPAA* is focused on a couple of eventful years. It might also be that the provincial world of Roth's fiction, so thickly crowded with family members, friends, and acquaintances from a relatively small community and their petty incidents, cannot easily expand to accommodate general history. Thus the author, for example, stumbles on the barely tenable conspiracy-theory denouement of *TPAA*; or deploys satirical overtones in *OS*, introducing the highly improbable interest of public figures such as Lech Walesa or the late Romanian dictator Ceausescu in repatriating Jews en masse to their countries and releases the sardonic humour of the scene foreseen by Roth's *Doppelganger*, in which thousands of Jews, arriving at Warsaw station on a refurbished version of those very cattle trains once used for their deportation, are hailed by a jubilant crowd shouting 'Our Jews are back!' (*OS*, p. 45).

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<sup>507</sup> 'Loudmouth Jew' is the title of Chapter 2 (*TPAA*, pp. 44-82).

A crucial difference between *PC* and *TPAA* is the unusually favourable portrait of the protagonist's parents: 'In an eerie conversion, [*TPAA*] transforms the piety spouting, finger-shaking elders of the Roth oeuvre into prophets.'<sup>508</sup> However, this could reflect the naturally different attitude towards his parents of a protagonist who has not experienced yet the qualms and conflicts of adolescence, rather than the belated conversion of the Jewish prodigal son. Roth provoked many outraged reactions from within his own community to the controversial approach to Jewishness he chose throughout his literary production, starting from the early stories such as 'The Conversion of the Jews' and 'Defender of the Faith'.<sup>509</sup> Although it could be rash to interpret *TPAA* as a complete recantation of Roth's lifelong attitude towards his family, American Jewry, and Jewishness at large, the evolution is considerable, especially in the denunciation of the assimilationist approach advocated by Rabbi Bengelsdorf, to which the narrative opposes, as a sounder strategy in times of oppression, the ancestral protection offered by familial and communal bonds of solidarity.

Young Alex also shares — at approximately the same age — that philatelic hobby which will play so symbolic a role in Philip's misfortunes, although here, again, it receives only a cursory mention:

When I was nine and ten years old I had an absolute passion for her [his mother's] high school yearbook. For a while I kept it in the same drawer with that other volume of exotica, my stamp collection. (*PC*, p. 31)

If not 'the dominant metaphor throughout the novel', the stamps collected by the young protagonist are symbolically important and do 'forge several links': with the nation at large; with President Roosevelt — 'the country's foremost philatelist' (*TPAA*, p. 1) —

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<sup>508</sup> Joan Acocella, 'Counterlives: Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*', *New Yorker*, 20 September 2004, pp. 96-100 (p. 99).

<sup>509</sup> Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1986; first published 1964), pp. 125-145 and 147-184, respectively. For a re-evaluation of the latter story in the light of the Judaic exegetic and homiletic tradition of the Haggadah text read at Passover — namely, the parable introducing four sons with diverse attitudes, which are purportedly reflected in the characters of the story — see Gillian Steinberg, 'Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith": A Modern Midrash', *Philip Roth Studies*, 1.1 (Spring 2005), 7-18. For a general introduction to Roth's work, see Murray Baumgarten and Barbara Gottfried, *Understanding Philip Roth* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990).

‘who issued an unprecedented array of commemorative stamps honoring American parks and people’; and with his antagonist Lindbergh, since Philip is loath to give up the commemorative issues honouring his transatlantic flight, thus secretly sharing his older brother Sandy’s adoration for the image of the sometime hero of the family — and of a whole nation — now fallen into disgrace. ‘It is stamp collecting that lets the world at large enter the consciousness of Philip.’<sup>510</sup> In fact, the most direct consequence of Lindbergh’s election he can think of is that the value of the stamp commemorating his 1927 transatlantic flight would increase dramatically, thus making it the child’s most valuable possession (*TPAA*, p. 27). And when his father refuses a promotion that would involve moving to a Gentile neighbourhood where the anti-Semitic Bund is thriving, he regrets being a Jew mostly because he would never get a chance to obtain precious stamps from long-forgotten correspondence, stored in the attics of the one-family houses of the new neighbourhood (*TPAA*, p. 22).

Even racial and sexual discrimination is perceptively represented in Philip’s consciousness through those minuscule elements of collective memory that are stamps: if ‘Booker T. Washington [was] the first Negro to appear on an American stamp, [...] another twenty-six years had to pass [before a Jew appeared on a US Mail stamp], and it took Einstein to do it’ (*TPAA*, p. 23), whereas ‘the first stamp ever to show an American woman’ was a 1902 one picturing Martha Washington (*TPAA*, p. 74).

At one point Philip plans a futile escape to a Catholic orphanage: in the failed attempt, he will also lose his most precious stamp collection (*TPAA*, pp. 235-236). He is attempting to escape from his family, his people, and history at the same time: ‘I wanted nothing to do with history. I wanted to be a boy on the smallest scale possible. I wanted to be an orphan’ (*TPAA*, p. 233). The orphanage had made a passing appearance in *PC*, with Alex imagining his own death on a replica of its iron picket fence while planning to leap from a window of the apartment where he is having his first, clumsy experience with mercenary love (*PC*, p. 171).

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<sup>510</sup> William E. Engel, ‘Philip Roth Comes of Age’, *Sewanee Review*, 114.1 (Winter 2006), ix-xii (p. xi).

Finally, Philip's family's respect and awe — verging on idolatry — for President Roosevelt in *TPAA* is reminiscent of Alex Portnoy's recollection of how 'in 1942 [...] my father was saying prayers for F.D.R. on the High Holidays, and my mother blessing him over the Friday night candles' (*PC*, p. 237). In *TPAA*, the private-familiar and the national-historical plot are more than episodically interlaced.

### 3.2. Great Men Make History, Little Men Are Undone by It: The Agential Constellation of *TPAA*

I came upon a sentence in which [Arthur] Schlesinger notes that there were some Republican isolationists who wanted to run Lindbergh for president in 1940. That's all there was, that one sentence with its reference to Lindbergh and to a fact about him I'd not known. It made me think, 'What if they had?' and I wrote the question in the margin. Between writing down that question and the fully evolved book there were three years of work, but that's how the idea came to me.<sup>511</sup>

Although it is not clear or mentioned by Roth that he might have been inspired by this source, the election of Lindbergh to the presidency occurs in at least another alternate history of WWII, 'What if Hitler Had Won the Second World War?', a speculative essay by historian John Lukacs.<sup>512</sup> However, in this instance Lindbergh's election does not take place in 1940 but in 1944; more important still, it is a piece of information which contributes to the historical background of the main focus of the text, that is, a post-war world in which Europe is dominated by victorious Nazi Germany. Besides the argumentative — rather than narrative — nature of Lukacs' text, the difference lies thus in the focus, which in Roth's novel is constituted by the nexus event itself and its immediate aftermath, rather than its long-term consequences.

Possible antecedents in Roth's own work, however proposed, are even more dubious:

Roth had already experimented with alternative histories in earlier works: Kafka living out his life as Hebrew school teacher in New Jersey in 'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting; or Looking at Kafka' (1973) and Anne Frank surviving the war and immigrating to America in the fantasy of his writer alter ego Zuckerman in *The Ghost Writer*. *The Plot Against America* differs from the others in that the alternative history impacts directly on his personal family autobiography.<sup>513</sup>

While direct — if fictional — personal involvement in the events may have enhanced the emotional impact of the narrative, a more definite difference between *TPAA* and its

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<sup>511</sup> Philip Roth, 'The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*', *New York Book Review*, 19 September 2004, pp. 10-12 (p. 10).

<sup>512</sup> John Lukacs, 'What if Hitler Had Won the Second World War?', in David Wallechinsky and Irving Wallace, eds, *The People's Almanac #2* (New York: Morrow, 1978), pp. 396-398. See also Rosenfeld, 2005, pp. 120-122 (p. 121).

<sup>513</sup> Hana Wirth-Nesher, 'Roth's Autobiographical Writings', in Timothy Parrish, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 158-172 (p. 168).

possible antecedents is the fact that in the latter the alternatives concern individual destinies rather than the whole historical timeline; furthermore, Roth's interest appears to have been more literary than historical in the choice of the protagonists, although Anne Frank's diary transcends the boundaries of private history to become precious evidence of the persecution undergone by her people; besides, the protagonist's encounter with her is not even confirmed as real in the narrative world inhabited by Zuckerman.

At any rate, it appears that, if not the definite idea for a novel on the subject, the controversial image of Lindbergh, both the paradigmatic tragic American hero and a potential political menace, had been haunting Roth's imagination for some time before being developed into a fully fledged narrative. Indeed, in *American Pastoral* [hereafter: *AP*]<sup>514</sup> there is some revelatory evidence of the author's fascination with Lindbergh, first of all in the mention of the kidnapping and killing of his son, which coloured his exemplary success story with the dark hue of tragedy and engraved his figure even more powerfully and deeply in the collective American psyche (*AP*, p. 170). Then, the plot of *TPAA* is foreshadowed in its bare outline, and Lindbergh associated with a long line of political rogues who were nonetheless elected by the mad, hapless American crowd:

Father Coughlin, that son of a bitch. The hero Charles Lindbergh — pro-Nazi, pro-Hitler, and a so-called national hero in this country. [...] There have always been sons of bitches here just like there are in every country, and they have been voted into office by all those geniuses out there who have the right to vote. (*AP*, p. 289)

Even the suggested counterstrategy of getting on top of a soapbox to denounce the 'real fascist, reactionary dogs' (*ibidem*) anticipates what columnist Walter Winchell will do in *TPAA*, in his desperate bid for the presidency (*TPAA*, p. 259).

In *AP*, however, such reference might still be accounted for in terms of parallelism between Lindbergh and the Swede, the novel's protagonist. Both men are 'naturals' in that they appear to succeed in everything thanks to steadfastness and dedication no doubt, but also because of predestination that lends to their exploits an ease, a grace and apparent effortlessness of their own, as if all they achieve were their

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<sup>514</sup> Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (New York: Vintage, 1998; first published 1997). Page numbers have been inserted parenthetically in the text.

due and not the result of toil and chance as is the case with common mortals: ‘Lindy [...] had never to look or to sound superior, [he] simply *was* superior’ (TPAA, p. 30); likewise, the Swede has

the talent for ‘being himself’, the capacity to be this strange engulfing force and yet to have a voice and a smile unsullied by even a flicker of superiority — the natural modesty of someone for whom there were no obstacles, who appeared never to have to struggle to clear a space for himself (AP, p. 19).

This is also reflected in their healthy, athletic, Nordic appearance, the kind of handsomeness which is endearing and awe-inspiring at the same time. But, while the personification of the aesthetic ideal of the Aryan male is in a sense consistent with Lindbergh’s sympathy for Nazi Germany, in the Swede — ‘a boy as close to a goy as we were going to get’ (AP, p. 10) — there is a striking, tragicomic contradiction between his WASP appearance and his Jewishness, a contradiction which, in the contemporary setting of multiethnic but still Anglo-Saxon-dominated America, is tantamount to classical hubris and will eventually bring about his downfall.

There is a fundamental elusiveness about the two personalities. The narrator of AP repeatedly muses over the ‘opacity’ of the Swede, one of ‘those regular guys everybody likes and who go about more or less incognito’ (AP, p. 77):

In one way he could be conceived as completely banal and conventional. An absence of negative values and nothing more. [...] That ordinary decent life that they all want to live, and that’s it. The social norms, and that’s it. Benign, and that’s it. (AP, p. 65)

The provisional conclusion is that the man holds no mystery at all; indeed, he is an empty shell:

There’s nothing here but what you’re looking at. He’s all about being looked at. [...] You’re craving depths that don’t exist. This guy is the embodiment of nothing. (AP, p. 39)

But soon the narrator realizes that deep inside the Swede conceals the scars of the personal tragedy that will be his undoing, a family tragedy similar to the one that smote Lindbergh. Likewise, the latter is a multifaceted public figure that does not yield a comprehensive image of the man, nor does the narrative ever provide one but for the

icon on display during his public appearances, untainted by the scars of his tragic past or his controversial media statements:

But it wasn't the wealthy advocate of commercial aviation who was launching his campaign that day, nor was it the Lindbergh who had been decorated in Berlin by the Nazis, nor the Lindbergh who, in a nationwide radio broadcast, had blamed overly influential Jews for attempting to drive the country into war, nor was it even the stoical father of the infant kidnapped and killed by Bruno Hauptmann in 1932. It was rather the unknown airmail pilot who'd dared to do what had never been done by any aviator before him, the adored Lone Eagle, boyish and unspoiled still, despite the years of phenomenal fame. (*TPAA*, p. 29)

The personal tragedy that befell Lindbergh is left in the historical background, possibly with the intent of preserving the suspense about his deep motives until the final denouement; in contrast, the narrator of *AP* sets about writing 'a realistic chronicle. I began gazing into his [the Swede's] life — not his life as a god or a demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man' (*AP*, p. 89). The result is a de-construction/re-construction of the man behind the public mask that elicits the readers' sympathy denied to Lindbergh, who in *TPAA* is always observed from without and whose real self never fully emerges.

Both the Swede and Lindbergh are blessed at first with a good-looking wife and a beloved child, adding up to the much envied and admired paragon of the happy American family. For both men, happiness comes to a close when Fate decides to smite them in their first-born child. Here, however, the parallel no longer holds, as Merry, although a gullible teenager who blindly embraces one utopia after another, is not an innocent victim but the agent of much suffering for herself, her family, and other people. This has consequences for the different reaction of public opinion to the two tragedies: while Lindbergh acquires an aura of sanctity because of his undeserved and bravely faced suffering, the Swede's failure as a parent makes him suspect and, to some extent, co-responsible for his daughter's crimes in the eyes of the community — even of his more immediate circle, as is apparent when it is revealed how Merry's former speech therapist gave her sanctuary in the aftermath of the bombing, but failed to inform the family because she presumed that 'something very bad must have gone on at home' (*AP*, p. 378). Ironically, the historical record still celebrates Lindbergh for his transatlantic

exploit, whereas his dubious political sympathies are relegated to the background, when not overlooked altogether; he remains the Lone Eagle celebrated in an old movie featuring in the leading role James Stewart, the prototypical regular guy who can perform acts of heroism, if needs be, and never make a fuss about it.<sup>515</sup> The following dialogue is exemplary in this respect:<sup>516</sup>

CHARLES LINDBERGH I take up a compass heading of 65 degrees out of New York, keep correcting the heading every 100 miles.

BENJAMIN FRANK MAHONEY, PRESIDENT RYAN AIRLINES CO. What happens over the water?

CL Over the water I keep watching the waves, see which direction the wind's blowing in, allow for the drift...

BFM And hope the Lord will do the rest.

CL No, I never bother the Lord. I'll do the rest.

BFM Might need a little help up there, don't you think?

CL No, it will only get in the way.<sup>517</sup>

By contrast, the Swede maintains an almost irreprehensible, stoical moral integrity throughout the narrative, until his eyes are painfully opened at last to the dreary spectacle of petty hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy that has surrounded him for all those years; his devotion to the self-chosen task of protecting his beloved ones from all evil is all the more touching for its ultimate pointlessness.

The crucial difference between Lindbergh and the Swede, however, is ontological, in their respective relationship to history. But not so much because one is a historical figure and the other a fictional character; indeed, the counterfactual Lindbergh who enters the White House is fundamentally, irredeemably *fictional*, whereas a Jewish glove manufacturer from Newark called Seymour Levov whose daughter was involved in violent activism could perfectly well have existed without contradicting historical evidence, precisely because his role is irrelevant in — although paradigmatic of — the dissolution of the 'American Pastoral', the dream of boundless progress inspired by the victory in WWII and the ensuing 'energy' which pervaded an entire nation (*AP*, p. 40).

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<sup>515</sup> *The Spirit of St Louis*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Warner Bros. 1957.

<sup>516</sup> The screenplay was adapted from Charles A. Lindbergh, *The Spirit of St Louis* (New York: Scribner, 1953).

<sup>517</sup> 'Memorable Quotes for *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1957)', *Internet Movie Database* <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0051003/quotes>> [accessed 30 November 2008].

As in traditional, non-counterfactual historical narrative, the fictional world in which the Swede exists does not violate the accessibility relation: the state of affairs which is true in the world of the novel is possible in the real world, ‘every situation that obtains in the one is possible in the other’.<sup>518</sup> Correspondingly, in *TPAA* the ‘codexal alethic modalities, restrictions [in terms of possibilities] imposed on the [fictional] world as a whole’,<sup>519</sup> are the same as in the actual world of 1940, and the historical characters inhabiting the world have the same individual endowments as their real life counterparts; this is both possible and necessary in a narrative that investigates an alternative historical path by postulating the same initial conditions as in real history, but modifying the outcome of a crucial event (the presidential election) through the participation of a maverick candidate, without, however, allowing for the alternate version of America to develop long enough to produce a world that is radically different from the one we know today.

*TPAA* is thus one of those ‘narratives, both ancient and modern, [which] comprise two or more agential constellations in various kinds of linking’, hierarchically differentiated, in this instance, by their access to power.<sup>520</sup> The public figures who make up the constellation of the power-wielders (for want of a better definition) shape the destiny of other, less powerful individuals — indeed, of whole nations — and behave according to a pre-existing script, in that their personality, motives, and typical actions can be predicted on the basis of what is already known about them from publicly accessible — and verifiable — sources; by contrast, wholly fictional characters can exhibit personality traits and behavioural patterns entirely of the author’s making and as wildly diverse as the chosen degree of deviation from realistic conventions allows. As Fielding wrote in the first chapter of Book II of *Tom Jones*:

I shall not look on myself as accountable to any Court of Critical Jurisdiction whatever: For as I am, in reality, the Founder of a new Province of Writing, so I am at liberty to make what Laws I

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<sup>518</sup> Ronen, p. 62.

<sup>519</sup> Doležel, p. 118.

<sup>520</sup> Doležel, p. 97.

please therein. And these Laws, my Readers, whom I consider as my Subjects, are bound to believe in and to obey.<sup>521</sup>

Every author is the founder, if not of a new province of writing, of a world constructed according to idiosyncratic — although by no means whimsical — rules, whose deviation from those valid in the real world will not be as wide as to make the fictional world entirely alien and therefore unrecognizable, according to the principle of Minimal Departure.<sup>522</sup>

The fictional Lindbergh must behave like the real, because he is one of the Great Men who make history, for good or for bad. However, Lindbergh's rapid and irresistible rise to power would hardly have been judged as positively as that of a 'Hero as King' by Carlyle: as *Blackwood's Magazine* once wrote — quite ungenerously — of Lincoln, 'no man is more unfortunate than he who is in a conspicuous position for which he is manifestly unfit'.<sup>523</sup> Indeed, if great men make history, little men who think themselves great and are promoted above their competency level are potentially ruinous to the fate of their country:

We exaggerate the ambition of Great Men; we mistake what the nature of it is. Great Men are not ambitious in that sense; he is a small poor man that is ambitious so. Examine the man who lives in misery because he does not shine above other men; who goes about producing himself, pruriently anxious about his gifts and claims; struggling to force everybody, as it were begging everybody for God's sake, to acknowledge him a great man, and set him over the heads of men! Such a creature is among the wretchedest sights seen under this sun. A *great* man? A poor morbid prurient empty man; fitter for the ward of a hospital, than for a throne among men. I advise you to keep out of his way. He cannot walk on quiet paths; unless you will look at him, wonder at him, write paragraphs about him, he cannot live. It is the *emptiness* of the man, not his greatness.<sup>524</sup>

In both *AP* and *TPAA*, the tragedy of a nation led by unworthy rulers is manifest in the disastrous effects on the lives of common, powerless people. The Swede 'was fettered to history, an *instrument* of history', indeed, 'history's plaything' (*AP*, p. 5; p. 87); as irrelevant as he, as much of a fragile vessel at the mercy of the winds of historical change are the child Philip and his family in *TPAA*. However, they are not only passive

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<sup>521</sup> Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, ed. by Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (London: Penguin, 2005; first published 1749), p. 74.

<sup>522</sup> Ryan, 1980, p. 406.

<sup>523</sup> Anon., 'The Convulsions of America', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 91 (January 1862), 118-130 (p. 122).

<sup>524</sup> Carlyle, p. 447.

spectators to and prospective victims of the fascist nightmare that keeps America in its thrall; they are also made to interact with the mundane gods who shape their destiny, whereas in *AP* the characters can only watch history, the larger narrative of a nation — and the world in which it plays so big a role — as it unfolds and affects their lives: the only interface is that of the television screen, offering some form of surreptitious catharsis — and hope for national redemption — in the insults uttered against politicians (*AP*, pp. 299-300).

By contrast, in the *agential constellation*<sup>525</sup> that makes up the fictional world of *TPAA*, historical figures are allowed to mingle and interact with the otherwise unimportant lives of the Roth family. At first, the connection is mediated and mediatised, thus giving them only the illusion of having been singled out by Roosevelt, ‘whose voice alone conveyed mastery over the tumult of human affairs [and] bestowed on our family a historical significance, authoritatively merging our lives with his as well as with that of the entire nation’ during his radio speech (*TPAA*, p. 28). Later, however, a more direct liaison with Roosevelt’s antagonist Lindbergh is established through one of the most controversial characters, the apologetic, inconsiderate, vain and naïve collaborationist Aunt Evelyn, whose affair and marriage with the much older Rabbi Bengelsdorf — the Useful Idiot who took upon himself the task of ‘koshering Lindbergh for the goyim’ (*TPAA*, p. 40) — brings disgrace and the seeds of division into the core of the family, alienating Philip’s older brother Sandy from the father’s allegiance to Roosevelt’s America and turning him into an ‘oratorical boy wonder’ and a mouthpiece for Lindbergh’s propaganda (*TPAA*, p. 358); echoing Aunt Evelyn and the rabbi collaborator, he brandishes his parents as ‘ghetto Jews’, unwilling to integrate and accommodate — literally — in the new America planned by Lindbergh and his acolytes (*TPAA*, p. 193).

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<sup>525</sup> An *agential constellation* is formed by the individuals interacting in a multiperson fictional world: Doležel, p. 75.

Thus, Philip is torn between allegiance to his parents and admiration for his independent, rapidly growing brother, who, to his father's chagrin and to his aunt Evelyn's delight, is all too willing to assimilate, even linguistically, by reproducing the accent of the Kentucky farmers hosting him during the summer as a member of 'Just Folks—described by Lindbergh's newly created Office of American Absorption as "a volunteer work program introducing city youth to the traditional ways of heartland life", but in fact alienating Jewish children from their families and foreshadowing the large-scale resettlement programme that is to follow in its wake (*TPAA*, p. 84). Before his eventual resipiscence in the face of outright persecution, Sandy is therefore doing metaphorically and in earnest what Philip learns to do literally, as a game, from his older friend and 'stamp mentor' Earl Axman (*TPAA*, p. 114): 'following Christians',<sup>526</sup>

the great overpowering majority that fought the Revolution and founded the nation and conquered the wilderness and subjugated the Indian and enslaved the Negro and emancipated the Negro and segregated the Negro, [...] the good, clean, hard-working Christian millions who settled the frontier, tilled the farms, built the cities, governed the states, sat in Congress, occupied the White House, amassed the wealth, possessed the land, owned the steel mills and the ball clubs and the railroads and the banks, even owned and oversaw the language, [...] those unassailable Nordic and Anglo-Saxon Protestants who ran America and would always run it—generals, dignitaries, magnates, tycoons, the men who laid down the law and called the shots and read the riot act when they chose to—while my father, of course, was only a Jew. (*TPAA*, pp. 93-94)

WASPs are privileged because, unlike Jews, they have chosen the right god, in earth as in heaven, favouring Lindbergh over Roosevelt:

The Reaganesque spell Lindbergh's presence casts resides in his power to evacuate history and exist in a mythic yesteryear, creating a national fantasy that Roth, here as elsewhere, links to a pastoral purity.<sup>527</sup>

But, whereas the Swede dreams of the Ur-American pastoral idyll of Johnny Appleseed (*AP*, pp. 315-319), Lindbergh's Homestead 42 programme is a parody of the Homestead Act of 1862, 'the famous legislation, unique to America, which granted 160 acres of unoccupied public land virtually free to farmers willing to pull up stakes and settle the new American West'; in fact, under the pretence of providing 'a challenging environment steeped in our country's oldest traditions where parents and children can

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<sup>526</sup> 'Following Christians' is the title of Chapter 3, pp. 83-121.

<sup>527</sup> Ross Posnock, 'On Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*', *Salmagundi*, 150-151 (Spring-Summer 2006), 270-282 (p. 277).

enrich their Americanness over the generations', it involves the more or less forcible relocation and scattering of Jewish families among the Gentiles (*TPAA*, pp. 204-205).

Thus, 'an engraved invitation from President and Mrs. Charles A. Lindbergh for Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf and Miss Evelyn Finkel to attend a state dinner in honor of the German foreign minister on the evening of Saturday, April 4, 1942' becomes 'history's [...] outsized intrusion' into the life of the Roth family (*TPAA*, p. 184), and 'Aunt Evelyn's disgraceful triumph [one] among the many improbabilities that the cameras established as irrefutably real' (*TPAA*, p. 201). Predictably, her social climb is followed by a precipitous fall, causing her to seek shelter within the family she had scorned: now even to Philip's eyes she is reduced to the pathetic caricature of an intermediary between gods and humans, 'emerging like an oracular priestess out of the Delphi of our storage bin' (*TPAA*, p. 350).

Sokoloff rightly points out that in the final part of the novel the two plots, the general-historical and the private-familiar, are separated. A newsreel-like reconstruction explains how history reverts to normal and presents divergent versions of the *plot against America* that has been hatched, corresponding to the point of view and the propaganda aims of different entities: the two US administrations — the pro-Nazi Wheeler who briefly replaces Lindbergh after his mysterious disappearance from the skies, the Democrat Roosevelt who is restored to office thanks to the support of the better part of the nation — the British, and the Germans; no final truth is reached as regards the fate of Lindbergh and the real motives behind his actions, as the survival and custody in Germany of his kidnapped son is an explanation not much more credible than others.<sup>528</sup>

However, by page 327 the historical plot has reached a conclusion — be it satisfactory or not — whereas the final chapter is devoted to a flashback explaining what happened to the protagonist and his family circle in the frantic final phases of the Lindbergh presidency. The title, 'Perpetual Fear', refers back to the beginning of the novel but also underscores the epistemological condition of individuals, for whom

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<sup>528</sup> Naomi Sokoloff, 'Reading for the Plot? Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*', *AJS Review*, 30.2 (2006), 305-312 (p. 309).

history in the making is the realm of the unforeseen: in this respect young Philip, left in the end with a new ‘stump’ to attend to (his orphaned neighbour Seldon) after that of his amputee cousin Alvin, is much like the father — and Holocaust survivor — in Spiegelman’s *Maus*, who never fully overcomes the anxiety and precariousness of existence he experienced in the lager and continues to hoard food and any kind of items that could come in handy, should the horror return. Ordinary people move within history like clueless — and cueless — actors on the stage, wondering whether the director-god shaping their destiny will turn out to be an Aristophanes or a Sophocles in the end. In contrast, the unforeseen is expunged from official historiography not only because the events belong to the past, but, much more importantly, because the plot in which they are inserted presents them as if what happened could not but have happened that way.

The ‘Modern Myth’ model<sup>529</sup> is a powerful tool for the analysis of this and other narratives in which different sets of characters enjoy different status and power — even if there is no supernatural entity. In fact, in the modern myth of Kafka’s *The Castle* and *The Trial*, the unseen, all-powerful authorities are human:

The visible/invisible world of the modern myth has been created as a secularized counterpart of the classical myth. [...] A transcendent, supernatural explanation is either no longer available or lacks authenticity. The senselessness of human actions and historical conflicts [...] cannot be explained by recourse to divine or demonic forces.<sup>530</sup>

Reciprocal access to the other world is also asymmetrical, and communication, when at all possible, is entrusted to intermediaries or informers whose reliability is dubious.<sup>531</sup>

Berman may thus have touched upon a significant interpretive key in his contention that Roth ‘has written an American mythology of Jewish suffering [and] found his way to an archetypal nightmare — the anxious, ancestral, midnight fear of the American Jews’, the fear that the Gentiles who have tolerated them in their midst might

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<sup>529</sup> Doležel, pp. 185-198.

<sup>530</sup> Doležel, pp. 196-198.

<sup>531</sup> Doležel, p. 187. The reliance of common mortals on ‘subjective, unverifiable reports’ by ‘self-appointed informers’ is not unique to the characters of modern and classical myth: indeed, it is the common condition of believers whose access to deities is mediated by the clergy.

one day turn against them<sup>532</sup> — ‘an atavistic sense of being undefended that had more to do with Kishinev and the pogroms of 1903 than with New Jersey thirty-seven years later’ (TPAA, p. 18).

In fact, the mythical interpretation of TPAA holds up to close textual scrutiny. From the very beginning, through the coincidence of Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight and Philip mother’s discovery of being pregnant with her first son, Sandy,

the young aviator whose daring had thrilled America and the world and whose achievement bespoke a future of unimaginable aeronautical progress came to occupy a special niche in the gallery of family anecdotes that generate a child’s first cohesive *mythology*. The *mystery* of pregnancy and the *heroism* of Lindbergh combined to give a distinction bordering on the *divine* to my very own mother, for whom nothing less than a global *annunciation* had accompanied the *incarnation* of her first child. (TPAA, p. 5; emphasis added)

The tragic demise of Lindbergh’s son adds a new dimension to the modern Promethean figure of the hero who defied gravity but, unlike Icarus, came back safe and sound and triumphant from his challenge to the limits set up for man: by then, ‘the boldness of the world’s first transatlantic solo pilot had been permeated with a pathos that transformed him into a *martyred titan* comparable to Lincoln’ (TPAA, p. 7; emphasis added). During the family trip to Washington, the child Philip will be overwhelmed by the sight of the Lincoln Memorial, a nation’s tribute to one of its tutelary gods,

the great pillared building with the wide marble stairs that led us up past the columns to the hall’s interior and the raised statue of Lincoln in his capacious *throne of thrones*, the sculpted face looking to me like the most hallowed possible amalgamation—the *face of God and the face of America all in one*. (TPAA, p. 63; emphasis added)

Lindbergh’s anti-Semitic stance even in the face of Nazi persecution brings about, a few years later, his fall from the Roth’s Olympus: ‘By [...] 1938, Lindbergh’s was a name that provoked the same sort of indignation in our house as did the weekly Sunday radio broadcasts of Father Coughlin’ (TPAA, pp. 6-7) — ‘our nation’s anti-Semitic propaganda minister’.<sup>533</sup> By then, a dyadic set of secular deities has been established, and Lindbergh’s place as the supreme positive god taken over by Roosevelt: ‘Lindbergh was the first famous living American whom I learned to hate — just as

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<sup>532</sup> Paul Berman, ‘What If It Happened Here?’, *New York Times Book Review*, 3 October 2004, pp. 1; 14-16; 28 (pp. 16 and 28).

<sup>533</sup> Roth, ‘The Story Behind TPAA’, p. 10.

President Roosevelt was the first famous living American whom I was taught to love' (*TPAA*, p. 7). The dualism is pursued in the final 'True Chronology of the Major Figures', where Roosevelt comes first and Lindbergh, second (*TPAA*, pp. 365-372). Roosevelt is 'the bulwark [...] against oppression', the personification of the key safeguards of American democracy: 'There was Roosevelt, there was the U.S. Constitution, there was the Bill of Rights, and there were the papers, America's free press' (*TPAA*, p. 18).

But none of these bulwarks of democracy appears to be powerful enough to check first, or undo later, Lindbergh's bid for power and the slow but relentless descent of the country into fascist hell. Douthat's claim that 'the Supreme Court is conspicuously absent from the entire narrative' is not entirely accurate, as is often the case with apodictic statements concerning long stretches of prose:<sup>534</sup> there is repeated reference to the appointment by Lindbergh of liberal members of the Court, even to its first Jewish member, Louis D. Brandeis, appointed as early as the Wilson presidency (*TPAA*, p. 81). Nevertheless, it is true that neither Court nor Congress put up much of an opposition to Lindbergh's rise and policies. In fact, perhaps the weakest feature in the narrative is the way historical disaster is averted, after a doomed attempt by an improvised paladin.

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<sup>534</sup> Douthat, pp. 75-76.

### 3.2.1. Walter Winchell: *Citizen Kane* Reloaded

Winchell was to gossip what Lindbergh was to flight: the record-breaking pioneer.<sup>535</sup>

The Fourth Estate — the press — is personified in *TPAA* by Walter Winchell, ‘an anxiety-monger who brilliantly captured the national mood in times of uncertainty’.<sup>536</sup> In fact, with ‘his thirty million Sunday-evening listeners’ the sometime ‘New York vaudeville dancer [turned] into a callow Broadway columnist’, and ‘America’s best-known Jew after Albert Einstein’, wielded tremendous media power (*TPAA*, pp. 19-20):

Nine out of ten American adults heard or read Walter Winchell between his 9:00 P.M. Sunday night broadcast and his famed Monday Morning Column. His readers per day averaged 50,000,000, a column-reading total of 300,000,000 per week. By comparison the major political parties each totaled 5 million pieces of literature in a two-month campaign, much of which weren’t read. [...] His almost daily broadsides for President Roosevelt for two years were a major factor in blasting FDR into a Third Term.<sup>537</sup>

His cynicism procured him enemies big and small. For example, he recalls how, when he was following the trial of Bruno Hauptmann, the kidnapper of Lindbergh’s son, thanks to his good connections he was privy to many investigative secrets, which he used shrewdly: he exposed the merciless and repeated interrogations of Violet Sharpe, one of the Lindbergh’s kitchen stuff, which eventually led her to commit suicide and the detective in charge to threaten to ‘knock out your [Winchell’s] teeth the first time he sees you’.<sup>538</sup> The threat is uncannily evocative, in the light of his assassination in the novel; but his personal record need not have been evoked to support the hypothesis, as both presidential candidates and presidents in office have been targeted by killers throughout American history:

Though Presidents Lincoln and Garfield had been shot and killed in the second half of the nineteenth century and McKinley at the start of the twentieth, and though in 1933 FDR had

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<sup>535</sup> Roth, ‘The Story Behind *TPAA*’, p. 11.

<sup>536</sup> Neal Gabler, *Walter Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* (London: Picador, 1995; first published 1994), p. 378.

<sup>537</sup> Ernest Cuneo, ‘Introduction,’ in Walter Winchell, *Winchell Exclusive: Things That Happened to Me — and Me to Them* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), iv-xx (p. iv).

<sup>538</sup> Winchell, p. 109.

survived an assassination attempt that had instead taken the life of his Democratic supporter Chicago's Mayor Cermak, it wasn't until twenty-six years after Winchell's assassination that a second presidential candidate would be gunned down — that was New York's Democratic senator Robert Kennedy, fatally shot in the head after winning his party's California primary on Tuesday, June 4, 1968. (*TPAA*, p. 272)

With this anticipation of future events, our continuum breaks through to the alternative timeline, thus awkwardly stressing how the events narrated will not affect the overall course of American history: there will still be a Robert Kennedy aspiring to the presidency and he will be killed exactly as he was in history as we know it. The awkwardness is generated by the unnecessary foreshadowing of a happy-ending-like return to normality that the progressive deterioration of the political and racial situation in the novelistic reality had taken so many efforts to undermine in the consciousness of readers; furthermore, this is a violation of the conventional ontology of AH, which grants actuality to a state of affairs that did not obtain in actual history: at most, historical reality may be alluded to by having recourse to occasional, ironic anachronism such as the repeated reference to the Beatles in *FL*, or, in the same novel, the less subtle allusion to a modern-day terrorist tactic, parcel or letter bombs, the Unabomber being the most notorious example (*FL*, p. 77).

The implicit stipulation between narrator and reader is that they both know that the world of AH is not one of the many possible worlds — or sections, or partial images of worlds — created by fiction based on historical reality, but an alternative which, however plausible, never obtained; nevertheless, anachronistic allusions postulate the rather implausible survival of entities from the real world in the vastly altered circumstances. It is highly unlikely that a phenomenon like the Beatles could ever have come into being in the cultural climate of a Britain under Nazi hegemony. Yet AH authors apparently cannot resist the urge to give an account of the fate of exceptional individuals, even in dramatically changed historical settings: to mention another example, Mozart reaches international renown even in the alternate timeline of Steven Barnes's *Lion's Blood*, in which Socrates' survival and flight to Egypt set in motion a

chain of events resulting in the early collapse of the Roman empire and Muslim dominance over much of the world.<sup>539</sup>

Although to the general reader he will appear as a larger-than-life, almost caricatural character, the alternate Winchell running for the presidency is a close kin to his real history counterpart, and not only as far as his venomous tongue is concerned. Although not a religious Jew by any standard, he possessed a ‘radar-like sensitivity to any form of anti-Semitism’. He began his attacks on Hitler — including barracks humour about the Führer’s supposed homosexuality — as early as 1933, ‘far earlier and with far more prescience than all but a few political pundits’, and soon he became ‘the most rabid anti-Hitlerite in America’. He even concocted an alternate history of his own, describing in a 1934 article for the *Jewish World* ‘what would have happened to the world if the Jewish contributions to art, medicine, science and sport had been expunged’ and inviting Gentiles to ‘out-Hitler Hitler’. Of course he also targeted American Nazis of the sort described in *TPAA*, whose existence is taken from life but whose menace is magnified in the narrative.<sup>540</sup> In his capacity of semi-official Nazi-basher of America he also entertained close ties with the director of the FBI:<sup>541</sup> ‘J. Edgar Hoover, who adored publicity, courted reporters in general and Winchell in particular, because Walter had the largest audience.’<sup>542</sup> But this did not prevent Winchell from having contacts with mobsters as well: during one visit to Chicago, he managed to get physical protection from the local police, the FBI, and the underworld — all at once.<sup>543</sup> Curiously enough, however, his involvement with Lindbergh was essentially limited to the Hauptmann trial,

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<sup>539</sup> Steven Barnes, *Lion’s Blood* (New York: Warner, 2002), p. 177.

<sup>540</sup> Gabler, pp. 195-196.

<sup>541</sup> Conveniently for the plot, this potential, powerful counterweight to public harassment of American Jews never appears in the narrative except for the threatening reference to his boss by the FBI agent trying to extort compromising information from Philip (*TPAA*, p. 164). Even in the historical appendix there is only cursory mention of a figure who wielded enormous, concrete power over US internal security for half a century (*TPAA*, p. 382), nor is the FBI shown as doing anything but complying unreservedly with the will of the President in office.

<sup>542</sup> Herman Klurfeld, *Winchell: His Life and Times* (New York: Praeger, 1976), p. 70.

<sup>543</sup> Gabler, pp. 197-198.

which inaugurated the spectacularization of criminal cases involving celebrities we are so accustomed to today:

As the first trial to be covered by the full panoply of national media, Hauptmann's prosecution was a milestone in the culture. Thereafter, the media would be as much participants in an event as reporters of it, shaping and sensationalizing on a new scale and turning events into occasions, national festivals.<sup>544</sup>

The Hauptmann trial in 1934 was a journalistic three-ring circus, and one ring was occupied by supersleuth Walter Winchell. Courtroom visitors were almost as interested in seeing Winchell in the flesh as in observing the suffering Lindberghs. In his reports the columnist dubbed himself the 'thirteenth juror'.<sup>545</sup>

Surely Winchell would have lashed out at the former aviation hero, had he run for the presidency, as fiercely and relentlessly as he does in the novel; whether he would have stood much of a chance is another matter entirely; that in the novel no more credible candidate jumps unto the breach in his stead is rather perplexing.

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<sup>544</sup> Gabler, p. 213.

<sup>545</sup> Klurfeld, p. 69.

### 3.3. The Story Is Extant: Roth's America That Never Was

The American triumph is that despite the institutionalized anti-Semitic discrimination of the Protestant hierarchy at that time, despite the virulent Jew hatred of the German-American Bund and the Christian Front, despite the repellent Christian supremacy preached by Henry Ford and Father Coughlin and the Rev. Gerald L. K. Smith, despite the casual distaste for Jews expressed by journalists like Westbrook Pegler and Fulton Lewis, despite the blindly self-loving Aryan anti-Semitism of Lindbergh himself, it didn't happen here. Though a lot of things that didn't happen here did happen elsewhere. The 'what if' in America was somebody else's reality. All I do is defatalize the past — if such a word exists — showing how it might have been different and might have happened here.<sup>546</sup>

One critic laments how in *TPAA*

the power of [the most personal and pathetic] passages is undone, again and again, by the creaking gears of the political 'plot', which is never convincing, never plausible, and which consistently undermines the drama of persecution unfolding in the streets and houses of Weequahic. Roth has set himself a nearly impossible task, [...] — the creation of an American *Diary of Anne Frank*, [...] whose pathos and pain is undercut at every turn by the reader's knowledge that the whole thing is fantasy.

The fantasy could have been pulled off, perhaps, had Roth chosen to play it as such — to cultivate, for instance, the dreamlike atmosphere that pervades [*MHC*].<sup>547</sup>

Alternatively, 'Roth might have pursued the careful realism of weaker alternative-history works like [*FL*]. Harris isn't a tenth the writer Roth is, but his alternative history works in a way that Roth's doesn't, because his history works.'<sup>548</sup>

However, the chief fault of Roth's alternate America may not reside in the implausibility of the alternative presented, or in the 'bizarrely overdone' historical appendix,<sup>549</sup> which systematizes and supplements the already generous background information provided within the narrative itself. Evidently, Roth did not take for granted a sufficient level of historical knowledge on the part of the general reading public, not even as far as the *Kristallnacht* or the main events in the early phase of WWII are concerned (*TPAA*, p 7 and p. 12, respectively). Apparently, he has not been overscrupulous:

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<sup>546</sup> Roth, 'The Story Behind *TPAA*', p. 11.

<sup>547</sup> Douthat, p. 74.

<sup>548</sup> Douthat, p. 75.

<sup>549</sup> Douthat, p. 77.

Ignorance in the United States is not just bliss, it's widespread. A recent survey of teenagers by the education advocacy group Common Core found that a quarter could not identify Adolf Hitler, a third did not know that the Bill of Rights guaranteed freedom of speech and religion, and fewer than half knew that the Civil War took place between 1850 and 1900. [...] Nearly 20 percent of respondents did not know who the U.S. fought in World War II. Eleven percent thought that Dwight Eisenhower was the president forced from office by the Watergate scandal. Another 11 percent thought it was Harry Truman.<sup>550</sup>

The credibility could have been more seriously undermined by the fact that the alternate America is shown in its slow making and swift, somewhat incongruous unmaking, whereas both in *MHC* and *FL* the alteration occurred some years before — and the Nazi Germany of *FL* is only a slightly milder version of the original, which enhances its credibility. In fact, both narratives give only a sketchy account of the causes of the change, and leave them further unanalyzed, whereas a minute, step-by-step description of the swift unmaking of a two-century-old democracy requires a prolonged and sustained suspension of disbelief on the part of readers whose whole life experience contradicts what is being described — and is bound to offer more ground for presumed inconsistencies or implausibilities. Contrariwise, the time elapsed from and the lack of details for the dramatic changes assumed in the other two narratives make them more easily acceptable as a given for readers who have seen — if not directly experienced — many a country turn from democracy to dictatorship or vice versa during a similar interval. Moreover, one can endlessly argue about the minutiae of the process leading to dramatic change, but, once the change is assumed as a premise for a narrative, one has to either accept it or reject it wholesale.

Roth claims to have had 'no literary models for reimagining the historical past', thus correctly marking a fundamental difference between *TPAA* and Orwell's *1984*: 'He imagined a dystopia, I imagined a uchronia.'<sup>551</sup> But he 'seems unaware of the vast and lively fictional genre of alternate history'.<sup>552</sup> Perhaps, if he had familiarized himself with the routine techniques of practitioners who are not a tenth the writer he is but know all the ropes of the art of tinkering with the past, he would have provided his narrative with

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<sup>550</sup> Bob Herbert, 'Clueless in America', *New York Times*, 22 April 2008.

<sup>551</sup> Roth, 'The Story Behind *TPAA*', p. 10.

<sup>552</sup> Laura Miller, 'The Plot Against America by Philip Roth', *Salon*, 29 September 2004 <<http://dir.salon.com/story/books/review/2004/09/29/roth/>> [accessed 28 October 2008].

a more convincing solution to the contradiction between the counterfactual version of history and reality as we know it today; or he would not have bothered to, which is the solution most commonly adopted by those addressing a readership accustomed to the conventions of AH.

But what the narrative lacks in the overall historical picture is compensated for in the everyday life details. Philip's story is a first-hand account by a boy who did grow up in Jewish Newark at exactly that time and did experience the social and racial tensions of the age, however filtered through a dim awareness of the general political situation: see the 'I declare war' game the neighbourhood children are so fond of, in which international politics is reduced to a whimsical alternation of invasions and counterinvasions (*TPAA*, p. 27). Philip's naivety is at times touching, as when he tries in vain to weigh his leg on the bathroom scale to make sense of the dramatic loss in weight suffered by his rebel cousin Alvin, who lost part of a leg in battle against the Germans after leaving home to join the Canadian army (*TPAA*, p. 113). At other times, his ignorance of the ways of the world is deceptive, thus allowing him disarming, Shakespearean-fool-like insights that would have sounded much more cynical in an adult's mouth. For example, in an ironical recantation of the obstinate attribution of a divine nature to Christ by the child in 'The Conversion of the Jews', he comes to blame all the trouble he is witnessing on

Jesus Christ, who by their reasoning was everything and who by my reasoning had fucked everything up: because if it weren't for Christ there wouldn't be Christians, and if it weren't for Christians there wouldn't be anti-Semitism, and if it weren't for anti-Semitism there wouldn't be Hitler, and if it weren't for Hitler Lindbergh would never be president, and if Lindbergh weren't president... (*TPAA*, p. 120)

Nevertheless, the same puzzling logic is applied to the opposite counterfactual argument that secured Lindbergh's election and is now behind his soaring approval ratings:

'But what if Roosevelt is president again? Then there would be a war,' I said. 'Maybe and maybe not,' my father replied, 'nobody can predict that in advance.' 'But if there was a war,' I said, 'and if Sandy was old enough, then he would be drafted to fight in the war. And if he fought in the war, then what happened to Alvin *could* happen to him.' 'Son, anything can happen to anyone,' my father told me, 'but it usually doesn't.'

‘Except when it does,’ is the trenchant retort Philip spares to his much perplexed father, whose authority he is by then beginning to doubt (*TPAA*, pp. 124-125).

A child’s natural resilience to hardship and urge to survive extenuate the horror and turn history’s tragedy into family drama: ‘It’s the children in the book who join the trivial to the tragic; far from constraining me, their presence was what allowed me my latitude.’<sup>553</sup> As is rightly pointed out by Wisse, ‘most of the actual fright that occurs in the novel is caused by [...] domestic violence’ — such as the savage fight between Alvin and Herman, Philip’s father (*TPAA*, p. 295) — whereas the widespread anti-Semitic violence of the day remains in the background.<sup>554</sup> However, far from demonstrating ‘Roth’s lack of conviction about his own central plot device’,<sup>555</sup> this is exactly how a kid’s consciousness<sup>556</sup> would plausibly react to the situation: by magnifying what he perceives as the most immediate threats to his safety, while expunging what he cannot fully understand. As Roth explains: ‘He is a practical child in a turbulent time, his world made of concrete and immediate fears.’<sup>557</sup>

Wisse herself acknowledges that ‘creating a fictional climate of fear has paradoxically allowed him [Roth] to write about his childhood with greater tenderness and appreciation than he has ever done before’.<sup>558</sup> See, for example, how skilfully he renders the morbid attraction-revulsion young Philip feels toward Alvin and his stump, comically culminating with him having to run to the cellar to puke after finding a scab in the bandages he had secretly tried on during Alvin’s absence (*TPAA*, p. 138); similarly, he had stealthily admired — but not dared to touch — the undergarments of his friend Earl’s disreputable mother: ‘I was still young enough to admire a brassiere from afar’ (*TPAA*, p. 42). ‘The pressure of what was happening was accelerating everyone’s

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<sup>553</sup> ‘The Story Behind *TPAA*’, p. 11.

<sup>554</sup> Ruth R. Wisse, ‘In Nazi Newark: *The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth’, *Commentary*, 118.5 (December 2004), 65-70 (p. 68).

<sup>555</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>556</sup> Roth defines it as ‘the child’s brain that degeneralizes the general, that cannot see outside the child’s own life and that reality never impresses in general terms’. Roth, ‘The Story Behind *TPAA*’, p. 11.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>558</sup> Wisse, p. 70.

education,' including his own (*TPAA*, p. 101), turning him 'from a Jewish American into an American Jew, or in the eyes of his enemies just a Jew in America';<sup>559</sup> yet to him sex is still a greater mystery than the suffering and decay associated with war.

What the child would have missed his older and wiser self supplements, with the rhetorical tools he has acquired in the meantime. The narrator is particularly skilful in stressing for readers overwhelmingly accustomed to an audiovisual culture how in the America of the early 1940s the radio was the mass medium of choice. Hence the distinctive voice and rhetorical style of the main public figures. Winchell is defined by his 'rapid-fire [...] delivery and the pugnacious [...] cynicism lending every scoop the sensational air of an expose, [...] embodying the passions of the cheesiest of the new subliterate dailies' and coining neologisms such as 'ratzis' to brandish American Nazi sympathizers (*TPAA*, p. 20).<sup>560</sup> At the opposite end of the political and rhetorical spectrum is the (fictional) conservative Rabbi Bengelsdorf, whose 'courtly southern accent, along with his sonorous cadences [...] left an impression of dignified profundity' — a judgement whose irony is immediately exposed by the rabbi's pompous comparison of himself to classical philosophers (*TPAA*, p. 33). Predictably enough, the voice and rhetoric of Roosevelt and Lindbergh, the two presidential candidates, are also extremely different. While the former speaks with a 'confidently intoned upper-class enunciation', Lindbergh's laconic speeches are 'unadorned and to the point, delivered in a high-pitched, flat, midwestern, decidedly un-Rooseveltian American voice' (*TPAA*, pp. 28-30): he expends no more than 'forty-one words, if you included the A for Augustus', his middle name (*TPAA*, p. 30), for the acceptance of his nomination, whereas 'his address to the nation [after signing an agreement with Hitler] was a mere five sentences long' (*TPAA*, p. 54).

However, the novel also reports an unusually long and eloquent Lindbergh speech, in which formal adjectives such as 'voracious' and 'pernicious' are used instead

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<sup>559</sup> J.M. Coetzee, 'What Philip Knew: *The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth', *New York Review of Books*, 51.18 (18 November 2004), 4-6 (p. 5).

<sup>560</sup> See also Klurfeld, p. 68.

of the simplistic, redundant one-liners he had relied upon thus far, from the campaign slogan ‘Vote for Lindbergh or vote for war’, to ‘keeping America out of all foreign wars and [...] keeping all foreign wars out of America’ and ‘an independent destiny for America’, this last phrase being repeated ‘some fifteen times’ in his State of the Union address (*TPAA*, pp. 83-84). The speech is important also because it makes a point that is counterfactual in the alternate timeline but factual in the historical timeline, thus reflecting a widespread uneasiness in Western democracies at the idea of allying themselves with the Soviet Union, an uneasiness that will eventually escalate into the Cold War: ‘If we had allowed our nation to be dragged into this world war on the side of Great Britain and France, we would now find our great democracy allied with the evil regime of the USSR’ (*TPAA*, p. 84). Facile and morally repulsive as it is by hindsight, Lindbergh’s rhetoric is not without appeal, although the powerful counterargument to the plausibility of its effectiveness is that, since isolationist sentiments did not prevail in the actual US, evidently they were not strong enough, probably not even if the aviation hero had invested his charisma in the cause of ‘keeping America out of all foreign wars’.

The partial implausibility of the counterfactual version of history presented is particularly disturbing when compared with the effort expended in grounding it in extensive documentation, as underscored by Roth himself: ‘I present 27 pages of the documentary evidence that underpins a historical unreality of 362 pages in the hope of establishing the book as something other than fabulous.’<sup>561</sup>

Roth proceeds in his narrative within rather strict verisimilitude constraints, and his purpose does not appear to have been to blur and render ultimately unknowable the border between historical facts and fiction. The choice is evident in the decision to append basic historical information to the narrative proper in the form of ‘A True Chronology of the Major [and Other] Historical Figures in the Work’, plus ‘Some Documentation’, consisting chiefly of a Lindbergh speech, which in actual fact was delivered at the America First Committee’s rally in Des Moines on 11 September 1941

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<sup>561</sup> Roth, ‘The Story Behind *TPAA*’, p. 12.

but in the narrative is anticipated to days before the chaotic Republican Convention nominating him the Party's presidential candidate.<sup>562</sup> Although he claims not to have altered 'its content or impact',<sup>563</sup> Roth adds for good measure a few phrases referring to 'our inheritance of European blood' and warning against 'dilution by foreign races' and 'the infiltration of inferior blood', which were not pronounced during Lindbergh's public address but 'turn up in diary entries from those years' (*TPAA*, p. 14).

This procedure is similar to the treatment of historical facts in *FL* — where the fiction strictly adheres to history until the counterfactual turn in the course of WWII in 1942 and the only manufactured documents are based on actual facts — but runs counter, for example, to the strategy adopted in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*. In this novel, the historical 'evidence' is craftily intermingled with the narrative, providing not only proof that the writer has done his homework and acquired a solid background for the narrative reconstruction — as is the case with *TPAA* and *FL* — but also a powerful counterpoint to the fiction proper, blurring the distinctions and making it impossible, in the last analysis, to attain one, reliable truth about either the mystery story the protagonist is involved in, or the historical experience (the Vietnam war and the My Lai massacre) that marked him indelibly and motivated his further actions.

By contrast, for Roth it appears crucial to show how little would have been sufficient to deviate American history from its path by relying on forces that were already at work and powerful enough, when given the chance, to bring about dramatic change: Henry Ford's outspoken anti-Semitism<sup>564</sup> could have provided financial and media support for the rabid rhetoric of a Father Coughlin, while Senator Wheeler was the

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<sup>562</sup> In real history, the Republicans chose Wendell Willkie. As much of an 'internationalist' — i.e., interventionist — as Roosevelt and a Democrat himself until 1938, he was 'the favorite Republican of the intellectual establishment and old-media elite', who gave considerable support to his nomination. Thomas Mallon, 'Five Days in Philadelphia: The Plot Against Germany', *New York Times*, 31 July 2005.

<sup>563</sup> Roth, 'The Story Behind *TPAA*', p. 10.

<sup>564</sup> The vicious propaganda published in Ford's weekly magazine *The Dearborn Independent* in the early 1920s was later collected in *The International Jew*, which had vast influence on anti-Semites worldwide, especially in Nazi Germany. See 'Chronicle of the Neglected Truth', Chapter 9 in David L. Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford: An American Folk Hero and his Company* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), pp. 135-159.

Washington insider the popular but politically inexperienced Lindbergh would have needed for his ascent to the citadel of power. In fact, if not an Ur-text, at least a namesake of *TPAA* can be found in a scathing, half-documentary and half-satirical account of Wheeler's career, published when his star was on the wane but not included among Roth's sources,<sup>565</sup> the overall tone, however, is akin to the corrosive satire of the Nixon presidency in Roth's *Our Gang*: after his death, Nixon winds up in Hell, competing for office with Satan and attacking his poor performance in the Job affair.<sup>566</sup>

The readers' credibility is stretched to a considerable extent, however, when all the resistance the opposition is able to muster is Roosevelt's aristocratic disdain and refusal to acknowledge the challenge represented by Lindbergh, or the propaganda of a counter-populist like Winchell, 'the prototypical loudmouth Jew',<sup>567</sup> pathetic in his soap-box-top attacks on an opponent who, his inferior eloquence notwithstanding, has only to rely on his charisma to win the day. Roosevelt's reported reaction to the news of Lindbergh's nomination is defined, with sad irony, a 'robust response':

'By the time this is over, the young man will be sorry not only that he entered politics but that he ever learned to fly.' Whereupon he fell immediately back into a sound sleep — or so went the story that brought us such solace the next day. (*TPAA*, p. 18)

To compound the uneasiness with which readers follow the unfolding of the counterhistorical events, the belated rescue for American democracy sees the coming to the fore of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia of New York— quite an authoritative figure, but perhaps unfit to play a decisive national role. However, his popularity is confirmed by a hitherto unverified anecdote, which takes on hagiographic overtones. He is reported as passing a Solomonic judgment on a poor woman who had stolen to feed her siblings, then providing the sum for the fine himself, and solemnly proclaiming:

Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Baliff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.

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<sup>565</sup> David George Plotkin, *The Plot Against America: Senator Wheeler and the Forces behind Him* (Missoula: J.E. Kennedy, 1946).

<sup>566</sup> Philip Roth, *Our Gang (Starring Tricky and his Friends)* (New York: Random House, 1971).

<sup>567</sup> Douthat, p. 76.

The episode sounds unlikely and is most probably spurious, but not altogether impossible, since ‘New York mayors were indeed empowered to act as magistrates in those days’. Besides, its very existence in several versions, however not confirmed by authoritative sources, is significant: the lives of saints are full of such reports.<sup>568</sup>

Perhaps the improbability of improbabilities is, in the final rush-up to the happy ending and the return to history as we know it, as though its stream had only been superficially rippled and was now naturally restored to calm, that the institutional impasse is overcome thanks to Lindbergh’s wife’s appeal to her function of presidential spouse (*TPAA*, p. 317-319), a role invested with no power whatsoever in American history, let alone during a major crisis. Moreover, it is hardly believable that such a step could ever be undertaken by ‘Anne Morrow Lindbergh, of all people’.<sup>569</sup> Many years after, recalling her feelings about Lindbergh’s infamous Des Moines speech, she declared:

I was very distressed about it because he mentioned the Jews and said he felt the Jews were responsible for getting us into the war. Which I guess they were, which one can certainly understand. But I didn’t want him to mention the Jews, because I felt he would be called anti-Semitic.<sup>570</sup>

At any rate, she could not have overruled the decisions made by the vice-president, who, according to the Constitution (and a couple of centuries of institutional history) is the one and only person legitimized to run the nation when the president is unable to do so.<sup>571</sup>

Lindbergh’s all-too-convenient disappearance towards the end leaves a definite, unpleasant *deus ex machina* aftertaste; nor is the suggestion more convincing that a subterranean plot involving the kidnapping to Germany of Lindbergh’s son might be behind the president’s sheepish compliance with the wishes of the Nazi regime. Indeed, this is conspiracy theory at its most obvious. But conspiracy theory usually contradicts

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<sup>568</sup> Barbara and David Mikkelson, ‘LaGuardian Angel’, *Snopes.com* <<http://www.snopes.com/glurge/laguardia.asp>> [accessed 4 July 2008].

<sup>569</sup> Coetzee, p. 4

<sup>570</sup> Interview reported in *Lindbergh*. Dir. Stephen Ives. Insignia Films Production. 1990. See ‘Anne Morrow Lindbergh on: The Des Moines Speech’ <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/lindbergh/filmmore/reference/interview/anne06.html>> [accessed 30 October 2008].

<sup>571</sup> See Article II, Section 1, Clause 6.

reality, not a counterfactual version thereof; as a result, the narrative is situated at a double remove from the actual historical timeline, a complication both confusing and unnecessary to the plot: Lindbergh's ideological stance would have been motivation enough for his actions, whereas his secret motive mitigates his responsibility by making him a disappointing villain — more of a puppet than a quisling — but does not explain or condones the willingness of a whole country to acquiesce in his ignominious policies.

However, the mimicry of real history figures' discourse is at times stunningly evocative, as in the aforementioned speech by Lindbergh, or in the radio addresses by Winchell: one only has to compare them with the archive recordings available on line.<sup>572</sup> As stumps go,<sup>573</sup> this is a fairly well fitting one; so craftily elaborate is the prosthesis dovetailing with it, so nicely articulating that it is difficult to tell where the suffering flesh of history ends and its artificial replacement/supplement begins. Yet, it never really succeeds in conveying the illusion of events actually going on, as far as the larger historical picture is concerned. If it is meant as a reminder that it *could* have happened here, it largely fails; all goes for the worse in the worst of possible worlds for most of the narrative, then suddenly the course is reverted to normal by an even more incredible series of fortunate events.

Be this at it may, the most vivid and convincing depictions of the alternative America imagined by Roth are on the level of family and individual history, in the scenes which rely most — ostensibly, but in a few instances also demonstrably — on personal memories, a reservoir from which Roth has fished materials throughout his literary career: the basic setting is the Weequahic neighbourhood already familiar to readers of Roth's fiction, a microcosm in which the 'Watchungs, a low-lying mountain range, [form] the extreme edge of the known world' (*TPAA*, p. 2). It is precisely the domestic tranquillity of the 'happy family' (*ibidem*), the modest welfare acquired and

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<sup>572</sup> For example: 'Walter Winchell', *Radio Hall of Fame*: <<http://www.radiohof.org/news/walterwinchell.html>> [accessed 29 April 2008].

<sup>573</sup> 'The Stump' is the title of Chapter 4 (*TPAA*, pp. 145-181).

preserved through hard work and strict economy that is first described in minute, loving detail, then shattered by Lindbergh's rise.

The overlap between personal and national history is made clear from the outset of the narrative, as is its nightmarish quality:<sup>574</sup>

Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear. Of course no childhood is without its terrors, yet I wonder if I would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn't been president or if I hadn't been the offspring of Jews. (*TPAA*, p. 1)

A child-protagonist is a felicitous choice in this respect, as he has the glance of the innocent, of 'a boy whose stamp collection still represented nine-tenths of his knowledge of the world' (*TPAA*, p. 67), unburdened by history and the ill-boding remembrance of past injustice that could be visited again on his people, the eternal scapegoats. But his innocence is of short duration in the new era, and the boy is forced to grow up to the awareness of his misery and the impotence of his family to stave it off:

The father who'd defiantly serenaded all those callow cafeteria anti-Semites in Washington was crying aloud with his mouth wide open—crying like both a baby abandoned and a man being tortured—because he was powerless to stop the *unforeseen*. And as Lindbergh's election couldn't have made clearer to me, the *unfolding of the unforeseen* was everything. Turned wrong way round, the *relentless unforeseen* was what we schoolchildren studied as 'History,' harmless *history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable*. The terror of the *unforeseen* is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic. (*TPAA*, pp. 113-114; emphasis added)

The passage above exemplifies not only Roth's typically anaphoric style but also an idea of history as the play of random occurrences upon human lives. It might have been influenced by a formula by historian H. A. L. Fisher:<sup>575</sup>

Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave, only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalizations, only one safe rule for the historian: that he should recognize in the development of human destinies *the play of the contingent and the unforeseen*.<sup>576</sup>

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<sup>574</sup> There is possibly an echo of Isaiah 24. 17: 'Fear, and the pit, and the snare, are upon thee, O inhabitant of the earth.'

<sup>575</sup> Another possible candidate for influence on Roth is Simon Schama, who argues that the French Revolution does not 'seem any longer to conform to a grand historical design, preordained by inexorable forces of social change. Instead it seems a thing of *contingencies and unforeseen consequences*.' Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1990; first published 1989), p. xiv; emphasis added.

<sup>576</sup> Herbert Albert Laurens Fisher, 'Preface' to *A History of Europe* (London: Edward Arnold, 1935), p. v; emphasis added.

Although Fisher goes on to reassure his readers that ‘this is not a doctrine of cynicism or despair’, the admission of his impotence to predict historical events is a powerful rejection of determinism as a surreptitious attribution of meaning that can only be superimposed upon events *a posteriori*, when they are systematized in a causal chain whose end is already known. This is also the apt premise for a counterfactual rearrangement of the same chain through the alteration of the series of causal links, as is done in *TPAA*; what is narrated could have happened, because what did happen did not have to.

The blissful ignorance of the horrors to come is compounded in the narrative by the figure of the ‘poor old man’ — also fished from Roth’s real life memories<sup>577</sup> — who goes around asking ‘in broken English for a contribution toward the establishment of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine’, and seems ‘unable to get it through his head that we’d already had a homeland for three generations. [...] Our homeland was America. Then the Republicans nominated Lindbergh and everything changed’ (*TPAA*, pp. 4-5).

Presidential elections lend themselves particularly well to being treated as decisive moments in American history, and they certainly are, although it is arguable whether a maverick candidate like Lindbergh, ‘the plainspoken, rugged, heartland isolationist’,<sup>578</sup> for all his heroic aura and the way it could have been enhanced by the media, could have turned the tables so dramatically as to beat FDR, another American icon and one whose record in office had already proved him fit for the job. Granted, modern propaganda techniques had already been successfully exploited to elicit consent for even worse candidates; but Americans in 1940 were not nearly as desperate as Germans were in 1933, and American democracy was much more stable than its Weimar counterpart. At all events, what is least convincing is not the concoction of an alternative America as its sudden disappearance, leaving no discernible trace in subsequent events. The US joins WWII later, but makes up for lost time and succeeds in defeating the Axis

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<sup>577</sup> Roth, *The Facts*, p. 30.

<sup>578</sup> Matthew S. Schweber, ‘Philip Roth’s Populist Nightmare’, *Cross Currents*, 54.4 (Winter 2005), 125-137 (p. 126).

on schedule — atomic bombs included — just as though nothing had really happened; it might just as well have been a dream, making no claim on actuality, relegated to the mental world of its creator, so insubstantial is the pageant he sets up and dismantles as soon as he has made his point:

Counterfactual thought experiments are almost bound to fail [the] cotenability test if historians suppose that, once they enter their hypothetical world and make their first change (even if it is a minimal rewrite), everything else will remain the same as actual history.<sup>579</sup>

Apparently readers have not judged Roth's counterfactual experiment too severely. The fact that 'the book uses a scary premise to portray what turns out to be an optimistic ending' may or may not have made of *TPAA* an artistic failure; but it certainly did not result in a commercial one.<sup>580</sup> Indeed, the selling figures were flattering even ahead of the official publication,<sup>581</sup> and the novel sold 412,000 copies by May 2006, 'in part because it was seen as an oblique commentary on the Bush administration', its author's contrary opinion notwithstanding.<sup>582</sup> At any rate, between 2004 and 2005 the book had a 16-week run in the hardcover fiction best-seller list of the *New York Times*. 'Before that novel, however, Roth hadn't made the fiction list for more than 15 years.'<sup>583</sup>

Roth is not a historian and is therefore not bound to the same rigorous constraints that condition the writing of HC; nevertheless, much of the realistic effect — and of the documentation work that should help produce it — is wasted as a result of the implausible denouement. One possible interpretation is that Roth's quick 'retreat [...] to a reaffirmed status quo' may have been motivated by the 'foundation-dissolving notion of an unfixed past', the nightmarish vision of a Nazi America that is best dissolved once it has been exorcised.<sup>584</sup> Or, more prosaically and plausibly, his primary focus was on family history, and the counterhistorical setting was dismantled as soon as it had fulfilled its evocative function:

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<sup>579</sup> Tetlock, p. 371.

<sup>580</sup> Timothy Parrish, 'The Plot Against America', *Philip Roth Studies*, 1.1 (Spring 2005), 93-101 (p. 98).

<sup>581</sup> Frank Rich, 'President Lindbergh in 2004', *New York Times*, 26 September 2004.

<sup>582</sup> Rachel Donadio, 'Promotional Intelligence', *New York Times*, 21 May 2006.

<sup>583</sup> Dwight Garner, 'Inside the List', *New York Times*, 14 May 2006.

<sup>584</sup> Feeley.

Readers readily submit to the proposition that Americans might just as well have elected a president sympathetic or at least indifferent to many of Hitler's aims, but the book turns out not to be about that premise after all.<sup>585</sup>

This violates 'the one invariable rule of alternate history, [stipulating] that the difference between the fictional timeline and the real one must be obvious to the reader'.<sup>586</sup> In contrast, the two timelines first diverge, then are made to coalesce again, which confers some substance to the interpretation of the novel as a fable, advanced among others by Acocella.<sup>587</sup>

Similar criticism could be levelled at its antecedent — also mentioned in *AP* (p. 287) — Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*;<sup>588</sup> indeed, 'half the writers in America may be Lewis's descendants',<sup>589</sup> not only the Roth of *TPAA*, who manages to 'nod respectfully to his literary master'<sup>590</sup> by having New York Mayor La Guardia exclaim: 'It can't happen here? My friends, it *is* happening here' (*TPAA*, p. 305). Lewis is quite transparently bent on demonstrating the opposite of what the title claims, namely, that a fascist regime could take over the US by undermining first, then progressively abolishing all constitutional liberties and safeguards. The parallel with the rise of similar regimes in European countries is pushed to the description of a system of concentration camps, set up to detain first and eliminate later all dissidents and undesirables — eventually, even members of the ruling party who have fallen in disgrace. On the other hand, the degeneration — and, by the end of the novel, all but accomplished ruin — of the regime is reminiscent both of the debauchery of the Roman empire during its decadence and of the warlords contesting one another's grip over Chinese provinces before the advent of Chiang Kai-shek, a much more recent example and therefore of more immediate intelligibility to both author and readers.

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<sup>585</sup> Parrish, p. 94.

<sup>586</sup> Andy Duncan, 'Alternate History', in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. by James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp 209-218 (p. 217).

<sup>587</sup> Acocella, p. 100.

<sup>588</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here* (New York: Signet, 1970; first published: 1935).

<sup>589</sup> Berman, p. 14.

<sup>590</sup> Berman, p. 16.

Similar to the turn of events in *TPAA* is the reliance on the resilience of American liberties in the minds and efforts of the people, who, however, play a relatively more passive role in Roth's narrative, mostly awaiting the outcome of the power struggle although supporting the prominent figures (such as La Guardia) who stand up for freedom; by contrast, the protagonist of Lewis's novel is an old, mild-mannered and moderately progressive small town editor, the most unlikely of heroes by any standards, yet with such a deeply ingrained sense of justice that it makes him overcome his obvious limitations and take on the role and stature of a resistance leader.

Both narratives are disproved by ensuing historical events, with one crucial difference: the dystopia imagined by Lewis can only be declared false in retrospective, as at the time it still belonged to the negative potentialities of a volatile period which ended in a world war; by contrast, Roth's hypothesis, however realistic, is formulated *ex post* and finds therefore no support in the records, although in strictly historiographic terms it is sounder, as the ailing Republican party did toy with the idea of nominating Lindbergh, and senator William E. Borah even encouraged him to run for President, but met with a refusal (*TPAA*, p. 370). Whether Lewis actually believed or not in the risk of an authoritarian turn in American politics, his prediction has also been proved false. Granted, there were racial tensions, and anti-Semitism was not confined to marginal strata of the populace without resonance in the media, as the Swede is reminded in *AP*:

Did the Swede know that before the war there'd been a swastika scrawled on the golf-course sign at the edge of Mt. Freedom? [...] That the Klan held meetings in Boonton and Dover, rural people, working-class people, members of the Klan? Did he know that crosses were burned on people's lawns not five miles from the Morristown green? (*AP*, 314)

Even in the 'Safe at Home' chapter of his autobiography devoted to the early phase of his life Roth recalls a few, sporadic episodes of anti-Semitic violence he was marginally involved in. In one of them,

one summer, [a gang of *lumpen* kids] swarmed out of Neptune, a ramshackle little town of the Jersey shore, and stampeded along the boardwalk into Bradley Beach, hollering 'Kikes! Dirty Jews!' and beating up whoever hadn't run for cover.<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>591</sup> Roth, *The Facts*, p. 23.

But, although embittered by the Depression, most American citizens did not ‘cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them’:<sup>592</sup> ‘Our lower-middle-class neighborhood [...] was as safe and peaceful a haven for me as his rural community would have been for an Indiana farm boy.’<sup>593</sup>

Strangely, Lewis’s book is often cited as an authority still relevant to this day, a warning against present threats to democracy: an unfulfilled prophecy should rather be proof, if anything, of the contrary. Or, more correctly, what the author — whether he was right or wrong — said about the likeness of anything happening in the ‘here’ of then does not tell us anything decisive about the ‘here’ of now, which is a different place altogether, inhabited by different people with different values, and surrounded by a world which, in the meantime, has changed almost beyond recognition. Yet the power of such a fiction to depict a graphic and credible alternative to actuality is still so vivid that it resists commonsensical refutation: ‘Only an understanding of how history is being repeated and how techniques of brainwashing and psychological warfare are being applied can save us from a full fascist takeover.’<sup>594</sup> The argument is self-defeating in attributing prophetic power to Lewis’s novel. The very wording of the warning undermines its validity since, as so many times before, those crying the fascist wolf have been contradicted by the successive turn of events. Just as hollow sounds, by hindsight, the following warning, issued in June 1970:

Indeed, what are we waiting for? [...] The price you pay for failing to remember your errors is the agony and doom of repeating them over and over again. [...] So please try to remember as you read *It Can’t Happen Here* that it almost did, and not so long ago. It can happen here again. In fact, it may already have begun.<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>592</sup> As Barack Obama reportedly commented on small-town dwellers. Mayhill Fowler, ‘Obama: No Surprise That Hard-Pressed Pennsylvanians Turn Bitter’, *Huffingtonpost.com*, 11 April 2008 <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mayhill-fowler/obama-no-surprise-that-ha\\_b\\_96188.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mayhill-fowler/obama-no-surprise-that-ha_b_96188.html)> [accessed 15 April 2008].

<sup>593</sup> Roth, *The Facts*, p. 30.

<sup>594</sup> David Ray, ‘It Can & Is Happening Here: Commentary on the Relevancy of Sinclair Lewis’s Prognostication’, *XRAYs*, 1.5, 1-6 (p. 1) <<http://www.howlingdogpress.com/XRAYs/index.html>> [accessed 29 July 2007].

<sup>595</sup> Jay Richard Kennedy, ‘Introduction’ to Sinclair Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, pp. 7-13 (p. 13).

However, there are disturbing details in the novel that could be read as clues to the repetition of its nightmarish scenario in today's setting. For example, when the protagonist and editor of the local paper, Doremus Yessup, warns that 'no country in the world [...] can get more hysterical [...] than America', and cites as a case in point 'our war hysteria, when we called sauerkraut "Liberty cabbage" and somebody actually proposed calling German measles "Liberty measles"'.<sup>596</sup> In fact, in the runup to the Iraq war, some American restaurants were apparently inspired by the reminiscence of such culinary patriotism when they renamed French fries 'Freedom fries'.<sup>597</sup> As much disconcerting, by hindsight, is the recollection that 'the hick legislators in certain states, in obedience to William Jennings Bryan, [...] set up shop as scientific experts and made the whole world laugh itself sick by forbidding the teaching of evolution'.<sup>598</sup> Indeed, the world may be laughing anew today, only bitterly, as other legislators — not only in the US — are posing as 'scientific experts'.

The point both Lewis and Roth try to illustrate is that, although it did not 'happen here', it could have, and the Anglo-Saxon democracies were spared by the dictatorial wave that swept much of the world in the interbellum through a fortunate accident rather than their manifest destiny or intrinsic resilience to such a fate. It is as though the relative shortness of American history had produced a concentration of crucial turning points, resulting in a remarkable fascination with alternate history and the willingness of many an author, especially in recent years, to go 'fishing in the muddy slew of recollection which most Americans have in place of a clear pool of history'.<sup>599</sup> On the contrary, crucial events in the distant past usually have had too much dust settled upon them to be still able to spark debate or controversy. Likewise, 'the debate for and against counterfactual history has engaged British and American historians notably more

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<sup>596</sup> Sinclair Lewis, p. 28.

<sup>597</sup> 'Fried Politics: Restaurant Serves "Freedom Fries"', *CNN*, 19 February 2003 <<http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/South/02/19/offbeat.freedom.fries.ap/>> [accessed 1 August 2007].

<sup>598</sup> Sinclair Lewis, p. 29.

<sup>599</sup> Sinclair Lewis, p. 108.

than historians from other countries'.<sup>600</sup> This may be connected with a general — and legitimate — feeling cherished by Americans that they have been *making* history more than other peoples have, which in turn can also make them feel more entitled than others to *rewrite* history.

Almost inevitably, various *presentist* interpretations of *TPAA*, however decidedly rejected by the author, have also been offered, highly unlikely or controversial ones not excepted. While conceding that *TPAA* 'is not a roman a clef, exactly',<sup>601</sup> Douthat cocksurely affirms: 'If ever a modern novel were made for a political moment, it was Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* for the 2004 election. [...] Roth's novel opens a window into a world much like our own — a world rife with totalitarianism and anti-Semitism, with warfare abroad and repression looming at home.'<sup>602</sup> In fact, Roth's denial of the presentist aspect of the novel may not be exempt from ambiguity; Wisse, for one, suspects that his harsh judgement of George W. Bush as a character worthy of an Aristophanes play, 'unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation like this one',<sup>603</sup> could have been motivated by the fear that his counterfactual denunciation of anti-Semitic persecution be misinterpreted as support for the War on Terror.<sup>604</sup>

Admittedly, 'not once in any of this does Roth glance at events of the present day, not even with a sly wink'; nor is *TPAA* 'an allegorical tract about the present age, with each scene or character corresponding to events of our own time'; yet to Berman it is 'as if a second novel, something from our own time, had been locked inside and was banging furiously on the walls, trying to get out'. The evidence he gathered to support his case is rather thin, though. While surely President Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' announcement from the deck of an aircraft carrier was premature, this does not make him an imitator of Lindbergh, leaving aside the obvious fact that the former was eager to go to war while the latter would go all lengths to stay out of it; the parallels become more

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<sup>600</sup> Tetlock, p. 36 Note 1.

<sup>601</sup> Douthat, p. 77.

<sup>602</sup> Douthat, p. 73.

<sup>603</sup> Roth, 'The Story Behind *TPAA*', p. 12.

<sup>604</sup> Wisse, p. 70.

and more dubious, as first Muslims in the US are likened to the scapegoated Jews of yore, then antiwar protesters and Muslim radicals are said to ‘conjure a few scents and flavors of the 1930’s and 40’s’ in their demonization of an all-powerful Jewish lobby.<sup>605</sup> ‘But Roth has kept his opinions to himself,’ adds Berman. As a matter of fact, he did not, as he had set out to tell ‘The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*’ on the pages of the same magazine, only a few weeks before.

The problem with all interpretations assuming the present-day relevance of *TPAA* is not only that they disregard the author’s explicit disclaimer, but that they are practically impossible to demonstrate, if only for the basic fact that history, all similarities or even outright coincidences notwithstanding, never quite repeats itself. For example, while the Jewish plot against American interests assumed by Lindbergh and by isolationists at large was blatantly nonexistent, the threat posed by present-day terrorism is all-too real. Roth himself has always been wary of a facile superimposition of examples from the past to today’s events. For example, in *OS* he has his namesake angrily reply, to the incensed Palestinian who had compared the Israeli repression of the *intifada* to Nazi practices:

Nazis didn’t break hands. They engaged in industrial annihilation of human beings. They made a manufacturing process of death. Please, no metaphors where there is recorded history! (*OS*, p. 142)

The author’s interpretation of his own work, however interesting, need not be the most convincing; it certainly does not exclude the validity of other, diverging, readings, which in time can take on general currency in spite of the author’s protests. Such is the case with Ray Bradbury’s contention that his *Fahrenheit 451* is not, as is generally believed, an indictment of state censorship, but, rather, a warning against the pernicious influence of television on modern culture.<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> Berman, p. 15.

<sup>606</sup> Amy E. Boyle Johnston, ‘Ray Bradbury: *Fahrenheit 451* Misinterpreted’, *L.A. Weekly*, 30 May 2007 <<http://www.laweekly.com/news/news/ray-bradbury-fahrenheit-451-misinterpreted/16524/>> [accessed 5 June 2007].

Nevertheless, a novelist as seasoned as Roth knows that the stories we write sometimes begin to write themselves, after which their truth or falsehood is out of our hands and declarations of authorial intent carry no weight. Furthermore, once a book is launched into the world it becomes the property of its readers, who, given half a chance, will twist its meaning in accord with their own preconceptions and desires.<sup>607</sup>

Thus, presentist interpretations of *TPAA* have flourished in spite of the author's vibrant protestations:

Some readers are going to want to take this book as a roman a clef to the present moment in America. That would be a mistake. I set out to do exactly what I've done: reconstruct the years 1940-42 as they might have been if Lindbergh, instead of Roosevelt, had been elected president in the 1940 election. I am not pretending to be interested in those two years — I *am* interested in those two years. They were turbulent in America because they were catastrophic in Europe. My every imaginative effort was directed toward making the effect of that reality as strong as I could, and not so as to illuminate the present through the past but to illuminate the past through the past. I wanted my family to be up against it precisely as they would have been up against it had history turned out as I've skewed it in this book and they were overpowered by the forces I have arrayed against them. Forces arrayed against them then, not now.<sup>608</sup>

This has not deterred critics from taking issue with his version of American history:

Of course, it did happen here, only not to the Jews. It has surely occurred to every reader of this novel that its distinctive set pieces—above all, the scene in which the Roths are denied rooms at the hotel—were a standard feature of American life at least from 1896 (when Plessy legalized segregation) until the early 1960s. But, of course, it happened to black people, almost never to Jews.<sup>609</sup>

Michaels concedes that there was also discrimination against Jews in America, for example in the admission to educational institutions, to which he adds country clubs, probably an ironic reference to less serious concerns that those facing black people at the same time, or possibly an allusion to the upward social mobility of another Roth protagonist, the Swede, whose admission to previously WASP-only high society proves as vain and ill-fated as the rest of his American dream. But the conclusion is not that discrimination in whatever form against whomsoever is discrimination against all, and must therefore be unreservedly condemned; rather, Michael polemically wonders: 'Why should we be outraged by what didn't happen rather than outraged by what did? [...] In

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<sup>607</sup> Coetzee, p. 4.

<sup>608</sup> Roth, 'The Story Behind *TPAA*', p. 11.

<sup>609</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, 'Plots Against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism', *American Literary History*, 18.2 (2006), 288-302 (pp. 288-289).

what sense—except the Roth/Spiegelman counterfactual one—is the Holocaust part of American history?’<sup>610</sup> Similarly, Wisse argues that

behind *The Plot Against America* stretch the many years that American Jews have consecrated to Holocaust education and Holocaust simulation, activities based on the notion that there is moral and spiritual merit in the vicarious re-experiencing of so dire a past. But while the original impulse behind such commemoration was linked to the vow of Never Again!, implying a need to take effective political action on behalf of the Jewish people, Holocaust memorialization has increasingly slipped into little more than self-indulgent paranoia.<sup>611</sup>

This echoes on a larger, collective scale the previous allegation that, just as American Jews surreptitiously commemorate a Holocaust they did not suffer, in *TPAA* ‘Roth claims for himself the significant historical moment that he missed out on in real life’, being grown up after the epic turmoil of WWII.<sup>612</sup>

Michaels also takes issue at Roth’s mention of the Leo Frank lynching case (*TPAA*, p. 361), arguing about the numbers of people lynched because they were either black, or Jewish, or ‘generic white guys’, even deducing from the respective salaries of Frank and his purported victim that he *was* after all a ‘rich Jew’, and lynched for that reason: the disconcerting conclusion is that *TPAA* ‘portrays people who were in a significant degree the beneficiaries of American racism (American Jews) as if they were instead its victims’.<sup>613</sup> Consequently, *TPAA* ‘succeeds by activating a certain nostalgia for anti-Semitism’, by exploiting a tendency to ‘make bestsellers out of books that attack a racism that *never* existed’.<sup>614</sup>

This underestimation — verging on denial — of anti-Semitism in American history is somewhat mitigated by the ensuing recognition that

properly understood, Roth’s anti-Semitism is not a replacement for anti-black prejudice but a placeholder for prejudice of all kinds—anti-black, anti-gay, anti-Latino, anti-whatever. The point of a novel like *The Plot Against America*—the point of calling it the plot against America—is that it’s not just Jews but the very idea of America that’s the target of anti-Semites, that anti-Semitism is a kind of anti-Americanism.<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>610</sup> Michaels, p. 289.

<sup>611</sup> Wisse, p. 70.

<sup>612</sup> Wisse, p. 65.

<sup>613</sup> Michaels, p. 290.

<sup>614</sup> Michaels, p. 296.

<sup>615</sup> Michaels, p. 298.

However, Michaels is so caught up by his long tirade against class discrimination as the neoliberal replacement for racism that he fails to appreciate Roth's point. Anti-Semitism existed in America and it was motivated by the allegation that Jews were 'insufficiently American'.<sup>616</sup> However, here, as well as in Roth's work as a whole, the allegation is rejected not through a request of respect for a supposed Jewish diversity but by the proud assertion that American Jews were in all respects as American as all their fellow citizens, and that the respect they demanded came from the same common sources, the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, whose 'self-evident truth' that 'all men are created equal' is confirmed by the words of the Gettysburg Address, engraved in the Lincoln Memorial and recalled by Mr Roth when faced with discrimination (*TPAA*, p. 70).

Perhaps Michaels could have found better ammunition, for his polemic broadside levelled at Roth's presumed claim for Jewish exclusiveness in the history of American persecutions against minorities, in the indignant reaction of Sandy, when Philip asks him if he also ate pig intestines, as did the Negro labourers of the Kentucky farm where he spent the summer: 'Do I look like a Negro?' (*TPAA*, p. 99). However, here, readers are more likely invited to appreciate the dramatic irony of Sandy's self-delusory assumption that his assimilationist endeavours will preserve him from discrimination, a delusion propagated by the collaborationists *à la* Rabbi Bengelsdorf, mostly 'privileged Jews':

The Bengelsdorf supporters constituted an influential clique drawn from the highly assimilated upper echelon of German Jewish society. A good many of them had been born to wealth and were among the first Jewish generation to attend elite secondary schools and Ivy League colleges, where, because their numbers were minute, they had mingled with the non-Jews, whom they subsequently associated with in communal, political, and business endeavors and who sometimes appeared to accept them as equals. (*TPAA*, p. 269)

According to another reviewer, 'Roth's novel, while it looks back in time, speaks to the future as well', and warns against no less than

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<sup>616</sup> Michaels, p. 299.

the overall destruction of our Constitution. The threat is real, as witness the recent adoption by Congress of the ludicrously named Patriot Act. The same emotions that lead, in Roth's novel, to the overwhelming victory of Lindbergh over Roosevelt in 1940 seem to be taking hold among the electorate in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps confusing Bush with Roosevelt, Halio goes on to wonder: 'Will Congress and three-fourth of the states repeal the twenty-fifth amendment and let Bush try for a third? The next four years may be the most crucial for our country since its founding.'<sup>617</sup> Two years on, with a new president and a quite different political climate, the alarmist tenor of such overstretched interpretations has been pitilessly exposed.

Atzmon produces an even more controversial reading — indeed, a gross misreading — of *TPAA* as evidence that the real 'plot against America' was not Lindbergh's but yet another version of the infamous Jewish quest for world dominance.<sup>618</sup> Quite fittingly, his article confusing fiction and reality is published on a website<sup>619</sup> advertising, among other instructive literature, an e-book<sup>620</sup> tracing 'evidence of a hidden hand working through the Vatican [...], including an investigation into the theory that Pope Paul VI was impersonated by an actor from 1975 to 1978' — thus purporting to illustrate perhaps the most poignant example of unacknowledged talent for extensive performance in acting history — alongside a 'collection of [...] spiritual essays' including the inevitable *Introduction to the Protocols* [of the Elders of Zion].<sup>621</sup>

Much to the same conclusions as Atzmon comes a French reviewer of *TPAA*, who laments that the fiction has been burdened by a 'militantisme victimair'.<sup>622</sup> Incredibly, the historical appendix of the novel is mentioned as evidence of a 'Manichean' attitude which contradicts not only the sobriety of Roth's approach to the horrors of history here but all his record as an author and a public figure. Just as Atzmon

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<sup>617</sup> Jay L. Halio, 'The Plot Against America (Review)', *Shofar*, 24.2 (Winter 2006), 204-206 (p. 206).

<sup>618</sup> Gilad Atzmon, 'The Plot Against America, a Book Report and a Reality Check', *Truth Seeker*, 7 November 2005 <<http://www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/print.asp?ID=3788>> [accessed 9 May 2008].

<sup>619</sup> <<http://www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/index.asp>> [accessed 9 June 2008].

<sup>620</sup> Piers Compton, *The Broken Cross: The Hidden Hand in the Vatican* <<http://www.catholicvoice.co.uk/brokencross/>> [accessed 9 June 2008].

<sup>621</sup> Israel Shamir, *Cabbala of Power* (NP: Four O'Clock, 2007).

<sup>622</sup> N. B. [Noël Blandin], 'Philip Roth : Le complot contre l'Amérique', *La République des Lettres*, 24 May 2006 <<http://www.republique-des-lettres.fr/1226-philip-roth.php>> [accessed 7 September 2008].

takes at face value the very anti-Semitic slander expressed in Lindbergh's allegations about a Jewish plot to involve the US in a foreign war that should not concern it, so the reviewer transposes the conspiracy *sic et simpliciter* to the present day:

Étant donné la politique étrangère actuelle des Etats-Unis sous influence du lobby israélien — même contre ses propres intérêts géo-politiques, c'est désormais établi par les meilleurs politologues —, ce serait plutôt les arabes qui seraient aujourd'hui victimes d'une dictature juive américaine.<sup>623</sup>

Thus, nothing has changed, and Lindbergh has been vindicated; a powerful cabal of Jews is still holding America in its thrall and conspiring against national interests. If anything, all this proves once more that literary interpretation of the same work from different perspectives can yield opposite results — or, more dismally, that conspiracy theorists will go any lengths in their denial of the facts.

A much fairer assessment has probably been expressed by Wood:

The plot in the novel is not against America as an imperial nation or America as the land of liberty, but against America as an increasingly battered utopia of tolerance, an always threatened and never fully accomplished vision of shelter and respect for all.<sup>624</sup>

If the novel contains a warning, it is for our time as well as for all times, the admonition never to take for granted 'that huge endowment of personal security that I [Philip] had taken for granted as an American child of American parents in an American school in an American city in an America at peace with the world' (*TPAA*, p. 7). Thus, the counterfactual persecution suffered by Philip, his family and neighbours, and the Jews of America at large becomes paradigmatic for all the real history persecutions targeting Jews and other groups that have been and could still be singled out and scapegoated, even in countries with a long democratic tradition:

Our lives as Americans [are] as precarious as anyone else's: all the assurances are provisional, even here in a 200-year-old democracy. We are ambushed, even as free Americans in a powerful republic armed to the teeth, by the unpredictability that is history.<sup>625</sup>

Ultimately, the issue of the *true* interpretation of a literary text is undecidable, and rightly so. Aristophanes, 'who surely must be God' according to Roth, could have

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<sup>623</sup> Blandin.

<sup>624</sup> Michael Wood, 'Just Folks', *London Review of Books*, 4 November 2004, pp. 3-6 (p. 3).

<sup>625</sup> Roth, 'The Story Behind *TPAA*', p. 12.

found a rich source of inspiration in some of the most fantastic interpretations offered for *TPAA*.<sup>626</sup> Woody Allen, who is perhaps one of His most recent avatars, may have provided, if not a solution, a highly humorous twist to the whole question in the short story ‘The Kugelmass Episode’ — his personal take on literary AH. The protagonist is magically transported to the fictional world of *Madame Bovary*, much to the bewilderment of students and teachers alike, who never before had noticed in the narrative the presence of a bald Jew kissing Madame Bovary on page 100. Luckily, the matter is settled at last by a Stanford professor, who concludes: ‘Well, I guess the mark of a classic is that you can reread it a thousand times and always find something new.’<sup>627</sup>

That ‘something new’, however, should be based on what the text does say, rather than what interpreters would perforce insert in it. Since there are no explicit clues to a presentist palimpsest behind the actual plot, nor to a presentist agenda behind its conception, the author’s denial that *TPAA* should be read as a *roman à clef* has no ground to be refuted. Perhaps the least fascinating, but nonetheless the most plausible interpretation is that of an alternate autobiography that is also an alternate history of American Jews, who in turn may be taken to stand for all people of all origins or confessions in all democratic countries, who could at any time be deprived of those liberties they have always taken for granted. The novel is undoubtedly a Dyschronia, that much everyone will readily concede; the world it describes in its making is a nightmare that undoes the American dream, as could have come to pass in those perilous times; that it could still happen someday is not reason enough to conclude that the time for the fulfilment of that prophecy is ripe. It is therefore a Direct Dyschronia, which admonishes by the example of the past rather than describing a present in disguise.

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<sup>626</sup> Roth, ‘The Story Behind *TPAA*’, p. 12.

<sup>627</sup> Woody Allen, ‘The Kugelmass Episode’, in *Side Effects* (New York: Ballantine, 1991), pp. 59-78 (p. 72); first published in *New Yorker*, 2 May 1977. See also Collins, pp. 126-127.

#### 4. A Little More than Kin and Less than (a) Kind: Alternate History Goes Mainstream

In 1988 Booth still lamented: ‘Neither “side” in the literary battles about “referentiality” seems to be much aware of the extended discussion among professional philosophers, not about *whether* texts refer, but about *how* they do.’<sup>628</sup> In the interim, the interdisciplinary exchange has been more frequent and fecund, although not always leading to univocal answers to the same theoretical questions; as seen in the first part of this study, different approaches dictated by different concerns inevitably yield different results. However, there is growing awareness of the ontological issues involved in the analysis of texts with an undeniable referential content and of the rhetorical strategies shared by all texts structured as narrative accounts, whatever their truth value. In this rapidly evolving theoretical context, the boundary region of AH has perhaps not received sufficient attention to date, its status being mostly accepted as a particular case, rather than tested in comparison to that of texts with a similar ontological constitution, as this study has undertaken to do — if briefly.

However, within literature proper AH has acquired general acceptance, both as a subgenre within SF and as a legitimate, even fashionable narrative device of mainstream literature. This study has selected for analysis a triptych of narratives, thus cutting through a section of the subgenre of AH, namely the stories devoted to alternative developments and outcomes of WWII. The selection has not the ambition of being representative of the diachronic development of AH as a whole, not even of the thematic cluster chosen for analysis: those interested in a comprehensive survey of *the worlds that Hitler never made* will find a wealth of data and materials in Rosenfeld’s study.<sup>629</sup> Rather, the works analyzed can be considered specimen of a general, progressive tendency of AH to go mainstream.

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<sup>628</sup> Wayne G. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 7 Note 1.

<sup>629</sup> Rosenfeld, 2005.

It is therefore significant that Dick chose AH for the first novel of the most fecund phase of his career;<sup>630</sup> this choice contributed at once to the establishment of Dick as author, to the acceptance of SF within literature at large, and to the coming into its own of AH as a subgenre within SF proper. However, this inscription within a genre so diverse — and generally underrated — may have been a double-edged weapon; while it secured AH a readership and a certain degree of recognition, it also meant the extension to it of the stigma associated with SF as a whole and as opposed to *serious* literature. Moreover, some ambiguity and confusion has been generated by the superimposition of the generic — in the double meaning of ‘pertaining to a genre’ and ‘nondescript, vague’ — label ‘SF’ as a kind of literature more or less fantastic, in which the ontological constraints of the real world and of the literature purportedly describing it simply do not apply. In time, more sophisticated analytical tools were developed and the epistemological power of narratives overcoming the constraints of flat-footed realism acknowledged; yet the old stigma of an escapist retreat to self-shaped realms of the imagination where practically anything goes, a stigma associated with the popular phase of the pulp SF magazines, is still difficult to overcome, especially in academic quarters. Therefore, the success of a novel like *MHC* was first and foremost artistic, in that it contributed to the establishment of AH by showing how the speculative possibilities opened up by its adoption could yield a fascinating narrative world, haunting for its dystopian warning against the horrors of the past and of a possible, alternate present.

*FL* came in a later phase, when AH was fairly well established but somewhat confined to a niche of specialized — if enthusiastic and numerous — readers, attracted to the work of Harry Turtledove and other authors of popularized AH, sometimes combining well-known historical figures and events with the wildest improbabilities. By contrast, *FL* is rigorous in the ontological premises of the narrative, but popular and spectacular nonetheless, in its contamination of realistic (counter)historical fiction with a

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<sup>630</sup> According to the perceptive periodization by Suvin, 1988.

protagonist and plot borrowed from the well-established, even formulaic conventions of the detective story.

Finally, *TPAA* marks the somewhat awkward and idiosyncratic adoption of AH by a mainstream, by now canonical author. Its interest resides therefore not so much in the narrative results — aesthetically and emotionally compelling on the one hand, but based on a shallow ontological foundation on the other hand — as in the unanalyzed choice by Roth of a device that no longer needs motivation or excuse. The only concession to former practices, whereby an author treading on uncertain ground justifies his ways before readers, is the appended reference to solid historical evidence for the hypothesis presented. Significantly, other mainstream authors that have recently followed in Roth's steps have dispensed with such an apparatus altogether. Roughly speaking: *MHC* established — or helped to establish — AH *within* SF; *FL* did so *outside* SF; *TPAA*, *above or beyond* SF.

Nonetheless, it could be exaggerated to conclude, as does one reviewer, that the novel marks 'the coming of age not just of a boy, but also of America—and, in the process, of Roth himself as a world-class novelist'.<sup>631</sup> This last claim in particular does not take into due account not only the dazzling virtuosity of early works such as *PC* or the stories in *Goodbye Columbus* but the canonical status already acquired within American Literature by his more mature works; *American Pastoral* alone, in its compelling portrait of the shattered dreams of postwar America, would be recommendation enough for the admission of its author within the ranks of contemporary classics.<sup>632</sup>

To the definitive acceptability in mainstream fiction of AH as a literary device — if not a full-blown ontology underlying plots — will certainly contribute its adoption in *Alfred & Emily*, the latest novel by the recent Nobel laureate, Doris Lessing.<sup>633</sup> While the second part is based on the actual lives of the author's parents, in the novella which

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<sup>631</sup> Engel, p. xii.

<sup>632</sup> Roth is the second living American author — after Saul Bellow — whose work has been published in the *Library of America* series.

<sup>633</sup> Doris Lessing, *Alfred & Emily* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

constitutes the first part the two meet but do not marry, in a world in which War World I never takes place to bring the couple — an amputee and a nurse — together. One obvious consequence is that Doris is never born. Some reviewers consider the ‘novella’ ‘sketchy’ and ‘insubstantial’<sup>634</sup> and ‘flat-footed’,<sup>635</sup> others ‘long and lively’,<sup>636</sup> others still, see it as ‘richer than the meandering, fragmentary commentary on her parents’ ill-fated, stifling attempts at Edwardian colonial life that follows’.<sup>637</sup> Thus Lessing puts AH in the service of (alternative) biography rather than the other way round, focusing her attention not on what the world at large would have looked like but on her parents’ lives ‘as they might have been had the Great War not happened [and] squatted over my childhood’.<sup>638</sup>

In Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* alternate history is clearly a mere literary device.<sup>639</sup> One, decisive element has to be different from reality as we know it for the plot to unfold, whereas the rest is left essentially undisturbed. In this case, society is organized according to biological engineering, not much unlike what happens in Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), only in an alternate present rather than the future. The alternate England, with the creation of clones and the establishment of a system of compulsory ‘donations’ of organs, remains in the background and is only briefly described towards the end of the novel. The reader is left with many a question unanswered as to the public debate that must have accompanied the denial of the most basic human right, that to decide upon one’s own life, to those whose humanity is hardly acknowledged in the first place. To mention one aspect of the huge ramifications such a system would have created, it is not explained whether the sterility of the clones was due to a fault in the technology or to a deliberate choice that would deprive them of a possible argument against their suppression, i.e., the further inhumanity of leaving their

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<sup>634</sup> Michiko Kakutani, ‘Doris Lessing Looks Back on Shadows and Parents’, *International Herald Tribune*, 5 August 2008.

<sup>635</sup> Caryn James, ‘They May Not Mean to, but They Do’, *New York Times*, 10 August 2008.

<sup>636</sup> Alan Cheuse, ‘Doris Lessing Mines Gold in *Alfred & Emily*’, *NPR*, 12 August 2008 <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93528963>> [accessed 30 August 2008]

<sup>637</sup> Heller McAlpin, ‘*Alfred & Emily* by Doris Lessing’, *Los Angeles Times*, 27 July 2008.

<sup>638</sup> Lessing, Foreword, p. viii.

<sup>639</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

issue parentless. Nor is it clear why the explants take place in four rounds — provided that the ‘donors’ survive the previous operations, which is not always the case — rather than all at a time: are the ‘notices’ issued according to a schedule or on demand of the organ concerned? Is the technology to preserve organs for a certain amount of time already available? Are any of the clones converted into donors when still children, in order to provide organs for patients their age? All these questions — and the many others that would easily come to mind — remain hovering in the gloomy atmosphere of the narrative, contributing to the general, disturbing feeling of a huge injustice that goes unchallenged, of wrongs generally accepted as fair in comparison to the advantages.

More than other genres, AH in general and this example in particular highlights the fact that fiction — indeed, any narrative account of events — need not, cannot ever be complete; the ‘map’ of the world described must have blanks on it, there is always something left unsaid, lest the picture be so encumbered with detail as to become unintelligible, or memory so weighed down by incidents that the reader be crushed under its unbearable burden, as happens to the protagonist of Borges’ story ‘Funes, the Memorious’:

We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table; Funes saw all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine. He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once, and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho.<sup>640</sup>

As AH Ishiguro’s novel has perhaps its main weakness in the nexus event, which has long been overtaken by scientific progress. The latter is considered controversial as a basis for counterfactual historical exercises, since it is mostly assumed that, once the general cultural and technological conditions are met, key discoveries are bound to take place sooner or later, independently of individual genius.<sup>641</sup> This is particularly true of applied science today, when discoveries are more often than not the result of collective

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<sup>640</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Funes, the Memorious’, in *Ficciones*, trans. by Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove, 1962), pp. 107-116 (p. 112). See also Edmond Wright, ‘Jorge Luis Borges’s “Funes the Memorious”: A Philosophical Narrative’, *Partial Answers*, 5.1 (2007), 33-49.

<sup>641</sup> See Joel Mokyr, ‘King Kong and Cold Fusion: Counterfactual Analysis and the History of Technology’, in Tetlock, pp. 277-322 (p. 280).

undertakings supported by substantial investments. Thus, it is hard to posit a realistic alternative path for human biology that could have brought to the production of clones soon after WWII, when in actual fact the technology is still to be perfected; more importantly still, the necessary consensus has not been reached yet for such dramatic innovation to be socially feasible, let alone for the breeding of humans as repositories of spare parts for failing bodies.

Thus, the novel is mainly an exercise in emotional restraint — rather than in social engineering — both on the part of the narrator and of the protagonists, who share with another famous Ishiguro character, the butler-narrator in *The Remains of the Day* (1989), the stoical acceptance of a fate that, in their case, is all the more disturbing and raises more moral questions than it answers. A contented slave is inevitably a controversial figure for modern day consciousness; even more so if a whole class of slaves supinely accept to be slowly butchered and eventually cut down in their prime.

But perhaps the most controversial among recent AH novels by mainstream authors is also the one closest to *TPAA* as regards subject matter, Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*.<sup>642</sup> It is set in a counterfactual postwar Jewish Alaska settlement enjoying large autonomy, whereas the foundation of the State of Israel has failed:

Israel collapses partly because the United States, having done this grand gesture, doesn't feel the same sense of guilt and the same pressure to do something to help the Zionists in Israel. Therefore the fledgling state of Israel is overwhelmed and defeated, and after that a lot more refugees come to Alaska.<sup>643</sup>

The premise is even more plausible than is generally known from the dramatic history of the Middle East. Although not approved by Congress, the proposal of resettlement to Alaska for European Jewish refugees was in actual fact supported by US Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes in 1940.<sup>644</sup> Indeed, it has recently been revived by President Ahmadinejad of Iran: 'Europeans cannot tolerate the Zionists in their region and country, but they want to impose them on the people of the [Middle East] region... Give these vast

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<sup>642</sup> Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007).

<sup>643</sup> Jon Wiener, 'Arctic Jews: An Interview with Michael Chabon', *Dissent*, 14 April 2007 <<http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online.php?id=10>> [accessed 30 November 2008].

<sup>644</sup> Patricia Cohen, 'The Frozen Chosen', *New York Times*, 29 April 2007.

lands of Canada and Alaska to them to create a country for themselves.<sup>645</sup> Nor was President Truman's unequivocal support for the foundation of Israel without opposition, even from within the ranks of his Administration.<sup>646</sup> However, the autonomy is soon to be repealed in the world of the novel, which starts as a detective investigation on the murder of a purported Messiah, later to discover a plot to blow up the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, hatched by the *Verbovers*, Hasidic Jews prone to violence and organized crime.

In fact, more controversial than the plot itself is, as one commentator polemically termed it, the 'novelist's ugly view of Jews'.<sup>647</sup> A few examples will suffice, starting with the protagonist's visit to an island he scornfully refers to as 'the planet of the Jews', calling to mind an unsavoury association with *Planet of the Apes*:

The hats in question are felt numbers, with high, dented crowns and mile-wide brims, the kind favored by overseers in plantation melodramas. The women sport head scarves and glossy wigs spun from the hair of the poor Jewesses of Morocco and Mesopotamia. Their coats and long dresses are the finest rags of Paris and New York, their shoes the flower of Italy. Boys careen down the sidewalks on in-line roller skates in a slipstream of scarves and sidelocks [...]. Girls hobbled by long skirts go along braided arm in arm, raucous chains of Verbover girls vehement and clannish as schools of philosophy.<sup>648</sup>

Of course, [...] a criminal organization like the Verbover ring can't flourish without the ready services of bagmen and secret lobbyists. [...] The Verbovers, with their Talmudic grasp of systems, their deep pockets, and the impenetrable face they present to the outer world have broken or rigged many mechanisms of control.<sup>649</sup>

'The way they breed around here, those people you saw in the street today aren't the ones you knew eight years ago, those are they grandchildren. Nowadays they're born pregnant.'<sup>650</sup>

They smell of lamentation, these yids, long underwear, tobacco smoke on wet overcoats, mud. They're praying like they're going to faint, fainting like it's a kind of observance. Weeping women cling to each other and break open their throats. [...] A growl, a feral rolling in the throat, low and half human, a rumble of warning or dark admonition: one of the black hats [...] has taken a reporter's question amiss. [...] It's madness, a Jewish riot, at once violent and verbal, fat with intemperate accusations and implacable curses. Skin diseases are called down, damnations and hemorrhages. Yelling, surging black hats, sticks and fists, shouting and screaming, beards fluttering like crusader flags, swearing, the smell of churning mud, of blood and ironed trousers.<sup>651</sup>

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<sup>645</sup> Hiedeh Farmani and Aresu Eqbali, 'Iranian President Launches New Tirade against Israel', *AFP*, 5 October 2007 <[http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20071005/wl\\_afp/iranisraelmideastpolitics\\_071005133939](http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20071005/wl_afp/iranisraelmideastpolitics_071005133939)> [accessed 7 October 2007].

<sup>646</sup> Richard Holbrooke, 'Washington's Battle Over Israel's Birth', *Washington Post*, 7 May 2008.

<sup>647</sup> Richard Johnson, 'Novelist's Ugly View of Jews', *New York Post*, 22 April 2007.

<sup>648</sup> Chabon, p. 101.

<sup>649</sup> Chabon, p. 105.

<sup>650</sup> Chabon, p. 111.

<sup>651</sup> Chabon, pp. 202-204.

When pointed to such descriptions, Chabon retorted:

It's traditional for American Jewish writers that, if you depict Jewish characters engaged in some of the less admirable kinds of behavior that human beings engage in all over the planet, like greed, rapacity, violence, intolerance, if you attribute such behavior to Jews, some Jews get upset about that. They accuse you, in the Yiddish formulation, of *making a shande for the goyim*: airing dirty laundry in public, making a display of disunity at a time when unity is so important. It doesn't matter what time it is, it's always a time when unity is so important. The great example was pointed out to me by my mother, in the aftermath of some criticism of my work: Philip Roth, who many times in his career has been accused of this, for many books, starting at the very beginning with *Goodbye Columbus*. My mom said it was proof that I had finally arrived.<sup>652</sup>

Although he is a talented novelist who received much critical acclaim for *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), Chabon may have indulged in a self-aggrandizing comparison here. Furthermore, the disparaging descriptions of Jews reported above lack the human sympathy that emerges not only in *TPAA* but even in the earlier prose of Roth,<sup>653</sup> for example in the satirical but also self-mocking chronicle of Alex Portnoy's encounter with a female Israeli soldier:

Could not maintain an erection in The Promised Land! [...] And all the while that self-assured little lieutenant, so proudly flying those Israeli tits, prepared to be mounted by some tank commander! (*PC*, p. 258)

And way up there, she grinned. That healthy, monumental Sabra! The work-molded legs, the utilitarian shorts, the battle-scarred buttonless blouse — the beneficent, victorious smile! And at her crusty, sandaled feet, this ... this what? This *son*! This *boy*! This *baby*! Alexander Portnose! Portnose! Portnoy-oy-oy-oy! (p. 269)

What damns Jews both in Chabon and in the Roth of *PC* is one, unforgivable sin: the aspiration to statehood. Just as Frankenstein pursues the monster he created to the utmost limits of the earth, the curse on Jewish self-determination is effective both in the Middle-Eastern desert and in the Alaskan snows. However, clinging to tradition has not redeemed the Alaskan Jews, in the eyes of the narrator, the way the all-American pastime of amateurish softball games does the Newark men towards the end of *PC* (pp. 244-246) — a New Jersey idyll that constitutes a powerful counterpoint to the dream of the Promised Land.

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<sup>652</sup> Wiener.

<sup>653</sup> One exception is Meyer Landsman, the detective-protagonist, who 'can see them all from the vantage of his powerlessness and his exile' (Chabon, p. 198).

With this last example, the counterfactual investigation of WWII and of the crime of the Holocaust has come full circle, back to the heart of darkness of that historical tragedy; if the War itself no longer appears to elicit, in Anglo-American narrative, the same strong emotional responses as before, the Shoah and the ensuing foundation of the State of Israel still stimulate both narrative and speculative exercises that are either polemical or met with polemical reactions<sup>654</sup> — and will probably continue to, both within and without the Jewish diaspora. Whether it is a blessing or a curse, this will also engage critics time and again in the rehearsal of old arguments. If a modest proposal is not out of place at this point, in this age where *the play of the contingent and the unforeseen* has reasserted its dominion over human history and shattered any illusion about a comfortable predictability of events, the powerful analytical tool of counterfactual thought should be better employed in the service of imaginative solutions to the coexistence of diverse peoples and cultures than brandished as a polemical weapon.

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<sup>654</sup> See for example the debate in two successive issues of *Foreign Policy*: Josef Joffe, 'A World Without Israel', *Foreign Policy*, 146 (January-February 2005), 36-42; Brian Klug and others, 'Debating a World Without Israel', *Foreign Policy*, 147 (March-April 2005), 56-65.



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## APPENDIX: MAIN AUTHORS ANALYZED

Philip K. Dick (1928 – 1982)

Philip Kindred Dick was born in Chicago on 16 December 1928, but soon afterwards his family moved to California, where he grew up and spent most of his life. His childhood was troubled by the death as an infant of his twin sister — a memory that will keep haunting him — and by his parents' divorce, after which he did not see his father for many years. After dropping out of Berkeley University and taking up precarious jobs, he undertook a literary career in the early 1950s, chiefly through the publication of short stories in the first phase. However, his dream of achieving recognition in mainstream literature was systematically frustrated and his first acknowledged achievement came with the science fiction novel *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), which earned him a Hugo award the following year and inaugurated the most fruitful phase of his career, in which he refined the techniques of multiple narrative foci and ontological displacement he had been experimenting with in his earlier production.

Dick died of a stroke on 2 March 1982 in Santa Ana (California), after a life marked by troubled relationships, frequent mental health problems, and drugs abuse. He has since acquired wide — if belated — recognition as a highly innovative and influential SF author. So much so that his work has been canonized through inclusion in the prestigious Library of America series. Some works from his prolific — although qualitatively uneven — production have been published posthumously, including autobiographic and mainstream novels.

Among the main concerns of his oeuvre are the elusive nature of reality and the question of what constitutes humanity, this last theme having been most famously explored in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), known to the general public through its adaptation for cinema in Ridley Scott's movie *Blade Runner* (1982). His personal brand of SF is therefore focused on the exploration of metaphysical rather than technological alternatives, as well as of artificially altered states of consciousness that prevent both characters and readers from obtaining a firm grip on the narrative reality. More often than not, assumptions are no sooner formulated than they are seriously challenged or utterly discarded, in an apparently random sequence of mutually contradictory states of affairs, leading the protagonists to existential instability or even paranoid obsessions.

Dick's approach to alternate history is therefore no less idiosyncratic than that to science fiction and literature at large. As a result, none of the multiple points of view in *MHC*, which alternatively express the consciousness of the various characters,

corresponds to a privileged access to the truth about the alternate world. For all any of them knows, either the reality in which they supposedly live after an Allied defeat in WWII, or the subversive counternarrative of the forbidden novel *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, or even both, could be illusory. Here as typically as in his work at large, Dick never takes or lets readers take anything for granted or established, nor can one neatly subdivide the fictional world along clear ethical lines corresponding to undisputedly positive or negative characters, occupied and occupiers, in the defeated America where the novel is set.

The action-packed plot is enjoyable for its own sake, in the gradual unravelling of a revised version of Kipling's Great Game, now with fascist dictatorships as the global players contending for world supremacy on the field of subjugated and colonized countries. The novel also touches upon the crucial questions of historicity and authenticity, namely of the objects sold by the dominated and collected by the dominators. In a reversal of the roles and points of view encountered in the postcolonial theory of our timeline, it is the Japanese colonizers who grant or deny aesthetic and economic value to the 'artifacts' of the country they have conquered.

Robert Harris (1957 – )

Robert Dennis Harris was born in Nottingham on 7 March 1957. A graduate of Cambridge University, he was a reporter for the BBC's *Panorama* and *Newsnight* programmes between 1981 and 1987, before leaving television to work in newspapers. A supporter of Labour, he was first Political Editor of the *Observer*, and then chief columnist on the *Sunday Times*.

He started his publishing career as the author of various non-fiction books including *Gotcha!* (1983, about the Falkland crisis), *Selling Hitler* (1986, a skilful and witty account of the notorious Hitler diaries hoax, which exposed the cynical unscrupulousness of journalistic sensationalism and was made into a successful television series), and the bestselling *Good and Faithful Servant: The Unauthorized Biography of Bernard Ingham* (1990), Margaret Thatcher's Chief Press Secretary.

His first novel, *Fatherland* (1992), was a bestseller throughout the world and has been translated into several languages. *Enigma* (1995), on the cracking of the German secret code during WWII, is an example of the author's enduring concern with war and its repercussions, whereas *Archangel* (1998) is based on a different counterhistorical premise from that of *Fatherland*, namely, the bid for power by a long-lost son of Stalin's. Harris has also published other successful — although more conventional — historical novels, such as *Pompeii* (2003) and *Imperium* (2006), both set in ancient Rome and widely acclaimed by readers and critics alike for the scrupulous documentation and accurate reconstruction of the age. His latest novel, *The Ghost* (2007), is about a Prime Minister all too eager to do America's bidding— and recognizable as a thinly disguised version of Tony Blair, with whose policies Harris had come to be fiercely at variance — and his ghost writer, the second to take on the job of writing the PM's memoirs after the mysterious death of his predecessor.

A common theme running through Harris' work, both his journalistic non-fiction and his historical and political fiction, is the quest for truth. In *Fatherland*, it starts as a detective inquiry into the mysterious murder of a Nazi party official in victorious postwar Germany, but eventually it turns out to be about the cover-up of the crime of the century, the Holocaust; the disclosure of documental evidence for it would threaten the incipient détente between the Nazi regime and the US Administration led by appeaser Joseph Kennedy. Helped by the seductive female American journalist Charlie but ruthlessly opposed by the Nazi establishment, detective Xavier March of the Kripo [Kriminal-polizei] will eventually solve the mystery and even find the location of the Auschwitz extermination camp; but it remains uncertain whether the information will

reach the freed world, whether his probable death will have been purposeful or purposeless.

Philip Roth (1933 – )

Philip Milton Roth was born in Newark (New Jersey) on 19 March 1933 to lower-middle-class Jewish parents. Recurrent features in his work, which has always shown a more or less overt autobiographical strain, are the relatively serene haven of the austere family led by hard-working father Herman and nurturing mother Bess, and the Jewish neighbourhood wherein he grew up, cohesive but fully integrated within American society. The ambivalent relationship with his family oscillates between the rebellious attitude of the young protagonist in his much celebrated novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and the fond recollections in his memoirs *The Facts* (1988) and *Patrimony* (1990). Similarly, his controversial approach to Jewishness, claiming that there is no contradiction or question of double allegiance in being both American and Jewish as the two identities corroborate each other rather than being mutually exclusive, has elicited angry responses to his early work — for example, the short stories collected in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) — and to his recurrent dismissal of the attempts to ground Jewish identity either in the lost traditions of the Old Country or in the new-fangled national pride for the State of Israel.

The provincial environment of Newark soon grew too small for young Roth's cultural ambition. He took a BA in English literature at Bucknell University (1954) and a MA from the University of Chicago (1955). He was shortly enlisted in the army, then discharged because of a back injury. Afterwards he embarked on a teaching career (primarily at the University of Pennsylvania) and took to professional writing, which earned him several prestigious awards. His first wife, Margaret Martinson Williams, died in an automobile accident and became the prototype of the wife in the troubled marriages of many a Roth protagonist. His second wife was the actress Claire Bloom.

By now canonized, Roth is a prolific author whose work has been customarily subdivided in 'Zuckerman', 'Roth', 'Kepesh', and 'Miscellany' or 'Other' books, according to the respective protagonist and alter ego for the author. However convenient, the classification is somewhat simplistic, as, for example, there are wide differences between the Roth writing his non-fictional autobiography in *The Facts*, the fictional if recognizable author confronted with his double in *Operation Shylock* (1993), and the child-protagonist in *The Plot Against America* (2004).

In many respects, this last novel stands apart from the rest of Roth's oeuvre. The loving memory of his dead parents is particularly touching and unprecedented in his fiction; indeed, the pervasive satirical overtones targeting friend and foe alike in the bulk of his literary production are remarkably lacking in this narrative, as is sex in the still innocent perception of the child Philip, so different from a host of sex-obsessed Roth

protagonists. Likewise, the safety derived from the consciousness of being Americans among all other Americans, sometimes at odds with the Gentiles (as in *American Pastoral*, published 1997, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1998) but endowed with the same constitutional rights, is no longer taken for granted for American Jews and, paradigmatically, for any minority who could be unjustly targeted at a time of national crisis. In the alternate timeline, isolationist sentiments find the eternal scapegoat in ‘warmongering’ Jews, and a successful candidate for the 1940 presidential campaign in former aviation hero — and Nazi sympathizer — Charles Lindbergh.

While vivid in the depiction of the progressive degeneration of American democracy and of the ensuing persecution of Jewish citizens, the novel as alternate history is marred by a *deus ex machina* denouement undermining the overall credibility of the historical alternative, which is dismissed as if it had never existed. Lindbergh turns out to have been little more than a puppet in the hands of Nazi Germany, where his supposedly dead child has been abducted to after his famous kidnapping; but his sudden and mysterious disappearance from the sky paves the way for the restoration of democracy and the rule of law — and the end of discrimination and persecution against American Jews — after a short, convulsed dictatorial interim. Roosevelt wins the ensuing election, and the US joins and wins the war against the Axis.