Arranging the Past, Reconsidering the Present:
The Emergence of Alternate History in the Nineteenth Century

Submitted by Ben Carver, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, November 2012.

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Abstract

This study examines the expression and patterns of alternate history in nineteenth-century Britain and France. “Alternate history” refers to the presentation of events that did not happen in order to consider historical trajectories that might have been and the consequent displacements of present and future. The central chapters of this thesis correspond to the three fields of writing in which these texts are clustered: in narratives of undefeated and resurgent Napoleons, which I trace from the rival journalistic claims made about Napoleon and his historical significance; in accounts that re-imagine the transition from antiquity to modernity, for example by delaying the passage of Christianity from the Middle East to western Europe; and, as part of the plurality-of-worlds debate, in the popular-astronomical imagination of variant versions of human history upon other planets. Three patterns of alternate history are discernible: the romantic-utopian, the critical-reflexive and the linear-chronological. I attach to these patterns the figures of the garden, the map and the dial. These models do not correspond to the three temporal fields of the recent, antique and planetary past, and there is not a straightforward development of these patterns or modes across the nineteenth century; they rather represent a spectrum of purposes for the fictional alteration of the past which occur at various moments and contexts in the century. Alternate history in this period has never been the subject of in-depth analysis.

The approach of this study will not absorb such transformations of history into a tradition of futurist writing, as some critics have done. Maintaining alternate history’s distinctness from futurism makes it possible to avoid framing the texts as precursors to science fiction’s historical anticipations. This study will argue that alternate history should instead be recognised as a category of writing that is aware of and concerned with the way that history is written and received, in particular with history’s interactions with other literary forms and the relationships between writing history and other disciplinary fields. More broadly, alternate history should be interpreted in the context of the often described formation of History as a positivist discipline by the late nineteenth century; but far from indicating a steady progression toward scientific historiography, alternate-historical texts reflect upon that transformation and its consequences in other literary fields (journalism, political theory, popular Astronomy, the romance novel) in the century whose “great obsession” is said to have been history.
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Introduction: The Castle of If

This thesis will follow the nineteenth-century progress of ‘alternate history’, which refers to the depiction of histories that never happened. The claims that I make depend upon the establishment of a context for these works of fiction and non-fiction, and that context is nineteenth-century historiography. The transformation of history-writing during the period is generally described as a movement toward becoming a positivist discipline, one which would shed its involvement with literary studies and with romantic methods of interpreting the past in order to extract moral messages for the present. This is not to say that works of literature ceased to interrogate the past and the basis on which it could be known, but that History increasingly defined itself through the formation of its own values of disciplinary rigour.\(^1\)

Alternate history is a form of writing that seems to assume both, and neither, the roles of literature and history-writing; through the prosaic presentation of developmental narratives populated with known historical figures, and of the formation of social arrangements in which those narratives take place, the texts’ prosaic qualities make them resistant to their classification as ‘literary’ works. Equally, the unhistorical nature of the events described divorces them from the practice of history-writing. I do not, however, wish to treat alternate history as a form of writing whose hypotheses are unlike any other. The presence of imaginary history is felt in works of late-Victorian fiction, as I will argue, and the examination of alternate histories leads to the recognition that non-history presses upon many texts of the period and allows us to read them differently, as having an alternate-historical dimension. One such work is *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844-5), published in the midst of the historiographical re-assessments that I have referred to. Here, the Count, himself an inventor of biographical pasts, reflects upon the dream-like quality of history that it acquires with the passage of time:

‘What my thinking today lacks is a proper assessment of the past, because I am looking at this past from the other end of the horizon. Indeed, as one goes forward, so the past, like the landscape through which one is walking, is gradually effaced. What is happening to me is what happens to people who are wounded in a dream: they look at their wound and they feel it but cannot remember how it was caused.’\(^2\)

The Count’s feeling of disjuncture between the past and present is voiced near the end of the novel, after his adoption of multiple personalities in order to exact revenge upon his betrayers. The most significant transformation of his identity is from Edmond Dantès, a

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\(^1\) I capitalise “History” when referring to it as a discipline (as I do with other disciplines) and will use lower case when referring to history more generally as past events and time.

merchant sailor with good prospects, to the Count of Monte Cristo—the demonic persona he creates for himself after his long incarceration upon the Château D’If. The curtailment of Dantès’ future, with its promise of a loving marriage and successful career, is replaced by the Count’s fabrication of a past for himself that is made possible through the acquisition of an inexhaustible treasure upon the island whose name he takes as his own. It is not only the personal past which is subject to re-imagination in the novel, for the plot is also laden with the contingencies of wider history, being set in motion by the reversals of fortune that characterise the career of Napoleon Bonaparte: Dantès is imprisoned for (unknowingly) carrying a letter on behalf of Napoleonic sympathisers prior to the escape from Elba and the 100 Days, which culminated in the Battle of Waterloo. The fickleness of European history at this moment is reflected in the incredulity of the Abbé Faria (Dantès’ fellow prisoner) when told of events that have taken place since his incarceration in 1811: “I could never have guessed what you told me a moment ago: that four years later the colossus would be overturned. So who rules in France? Napoleon II?”3 Dantès’ trajectory diverges from Napoleon’s: he escapes from his prison-fortress whereas the former emperor’s confinement on St Helena is terminal; Dantès is able to return as a revenging “colossus” and fulfil his ambitions. This is a novel whose narrative trajectories deviate from the course that seemed inevitable, from both biographical and wider-historical perspectives.

Alternate histories constitute a category of writing that also imagines the past to have been different, and by doing so they question the solidity of history, in the same manner as the Count’s reflections upon the passage of the past into the realm of dream or myth, a territory beyond the curve of the horizon of felt memory—figured here as a wound. In a late-century alternate history by Holford Castello, Aristopia: A Romance-History of the New World (1895), a variant past is also financed by the discovery of a treasure. In this narrative the history of America is rewritten following the discovery of a reef of solid gold by the first European settlers in Virginia; with it, they fashion a new society with inexhaustible resources—a social and historical endeavour in contrast with the Count’s project of personal revenge.4 Napoleon himself provoked the first alternate histories of the nineteenth century: as the emperor’s conquering spirit languished on a south-atlantic island, writers in Britain and France imagined the career that he might have had, and the transformations of European society that could have resulted if history had taken a different course.

This thesis will examine texts in the nineteenth century, from Britain and France, that derive from the broader sense of historical contingency, which present history that never was,

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3 Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo, 150.
a trajectory different from the one that led to current social and political configurations. These include astronomical writings that imagine variations of human history on other planets, a romance-novel that inserts a messianic legacy to be redeemed in English politics, and an account of Napoleon’s establishment of a global monarchy. This category of writing has attracted a range of labels which inflect and delimit it in particular ways; these include ‘allohistory’, ‘subjunctive history’, ‘What If history’, ‘counterfactual history’ and—to introduce the term I will be using for reasons set out in the first chapter—‘alternate history’.

Critical attention has been paid in recent years to the presentation of hypothetical pasts, and there is a division of approaches between those that concentrate on the individual or biographical sense of lives that might have been led, and those that consider these alternatives as possible historical worlds. Andrew Miller has focussed on the ‘optative’ reflection of characters in the realist fiction of Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Henry James, suggesting that the imagination of lives unled “say[s] something about the peculiar contingency of modern experience.” A recent book by Gavriel Rosenfeld is more concerned with the use of the technique in literature and film to reflect, and in some cases to direct, public interpretations of the past. Catherine Gallagher draws upon alternate histories in order to counter the extension of possible-worlds theory to fiction in general by critics such as Lubomir Doležel. In doing so she articulates the “world-historical changes,” which are present in alternate history, with the complex ontological status of characters within this type of writing. But this analysis is framed by literary-formalist concerns: she emphasises (and only includes) texts which are narrative and insists that although alternate histories tend toward the depiction of utopias and dystopias, “characters remain the fundamental defining feature.” Scholarship on alternate history and related categories will be overviewed in Chapter 1; here, my interest is to clarify the focus of this study, which is precisely the way in which alternate history serves as a format—the exemplary format, even—to consider social alterity, and to articulate the imagination of a society which does not exist (“utopia” in one of its meanings) within a framework of history that has not happened.

The framing context for this thesis is not a set of formal literary concerns, but the changes in how history was interpreted and written in the nineteenth century, which speaking generally can be described as the passage from a romantic to a scientific historiography. This transformation has been amply discussed, and scholarship on this subject will be surveyed in

Chapter 1. Alternate history, needless to say, is not a practice which aims to render the past in its most truthful form. Rather, I claim, it is a format which can reflect, and in more self-aware instances provide a critique of, changes in the manner of representing history. The texts are classified according to three modes or patterns: those which deploy past imaginaries in order to redeem (or sometimes to lament) a historical possibility which was never realised. I call this pattern the *romantic-utopian* and the figure I associate with it is the *garden*. The second is the *critical-reflexive* mode of alternate history, which recognises the way in which the past is laden with unachieved desires which persist in the present. As in the first mode, the text fulfils these desires, but simultaneously signals a recognition of the way that the (usually romantic) historian pursues, idealises and imaginatively recovers these spent possibilities; its real subject is the individual’s investment of history with hope. The figure I attach to this pattern is the *map* of utopia, which is a transformation of the actual topography with which it corresponds and with which it is compared. The third mode of alternate history is the *linear-chronological*. This is what happens to alternate history by the end of the nineteenth century. It becomes distributed between two categories: the science fiction tale and the counterfactual proposition for historical conjecture. In both, time travel is the mechanism by which the past can be revisited; the time traveller or the historian asserts his or her privilege to set the time coordinates and return to a singular moment in the past in order to intervene and redirect the course of history from the trajectory we know, or to make claims about what could have happened if a privileged event had occurred differently. The figure I associate with this pattern of alternate history is the *dial*.

Any idea of a smooth transformation of history-writing into a positivist discipline is complicated by these alternate-historical texts, for the three models—which might be supposed to move progressively from the romantic-utopian to the critical-reflexive to the linear-chronological—appear unsequentially throughout the period. The dates of these texts reflect a contestation across the nineteenth century between the romantic-utopian and the critical-reflexive; the first texts I discuss in Chapter 2, both of which respond to the character of Napoleon, adopt the latter of these two patterns. The reason, I argue, is that they themselves respond critically and ironically to a complex discourse that surrounds Napoleon and makes rival claims about his historical significance. The three *fin-de-siècle* texts that are examined in Chapter 5 recapitulate the three modes of alternate history within a span of eleven years. The formation of History as an academic discipline is, however, reflected in the latest texts of the period studied as they coalesce around the two categories of science fiction and

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9 Their number is distinctly limited; I will be concentrating on nine alternate histories, and discussing others which relate in their historiographical presentation.
counterfactual history, as described above. Prior to the specialisation of alternate history into these two distinct practices in the final years of the nineteenth century, the romantic-utopian and the critical-reflexive modes of alternate history stand as eddies and countercurrents in the unsteady and stuttering formation of scientific historiography—as befits a format that asserts contingency and denies predetermination.

Prior to its specialisation, Anglo-French alternate-historical texts do not belong to any particular genre or formal parameters. By including texts that pertain to journalism, the romance novel, Political Philosophy and Astronomy, this thesis cuts across disciplines, discourses and forms. (Poetry only, it seems, is excluded.) This distinguishes my study from existing work on the subject, which tends to corral texts which share tendencies of form or consumption. Instead, the texts I focus on are collected as exhaustively as possible (though there may be undiscovered alternate histories), and organised according to the three fields— which are also temporal frames—in which they seem to cluster. These are those that are set in the recent past and are attached to the figure of Napoleon; in antiquity as a way of interrogating the inheritance from classical culture; and, in geological and planetary history, as stimulated by the plurality-of-worlds debate. The classification and analysis of alternate histories follows, as described, the three historiographical modes to which they belong—with the inevitable caveat that some texts exhibit qualities of more than one mode. If the nineteenth is the century, as Foucault described it, whose “great obsession” was history, then the presence of historiographical awareness and experimentation across disciplines and forms is not unexpected.\textsuperscript{10} Historical descent is a process that troubled the materialist sciences, as it did the plots of realist fiction. The historical conjectures that define alternate histories also occur in a range of knowledge fields, and contingency in history is a concept that is returned to as both a promise of liberation and a pattern of historical desire in which one becomes ensnared. In sharp distinction from Edmond Dantès, who escapes from the Chateau D’If and executes the fullest revenge upon his betrayers through the adoption of multiple identities, there is Louis Auguste Blanqui, the vanquished revolutionary who was incarcerated in an island-fortress from which he could not conceive escape. Here, he wrote of the desolation of imagining other, better variations of human history, all of which were realised eternally upon other planets with which we could never communicate. “If,” for Blanqui, is an island-fortress rather than a city upon a hill.

This thesis concerns the \textit{emergence} of alternate history rather than its first iterations. The presentation of counterfactual pasts pre-dates the nineteenth century, having been

\textsuperscript{10} Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” in \textit{The Visual Culture Reader,} 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 229.
practised much earlier by Livy when he posed a fictitious scenario in which Alexander the Great was defeated by choosing to attack Rome rather than Persia.11 Isaac D’Israeli (whose son would also invent a history that never was) also posed counterfactual scenarios in an essay titled “Of a History of Events which have not Happened.”12 Equally, alternate history did not coalesce into a recognised format in the nineteenth century; critical responses to the texts under investigation describe them as oddities and experiments. Castello N. Holford, in the Introduction to Aristopia: A Romance-History of the New World (1895), writes that “of books giving a history of the past as it might have been […] I know not one.”13 This lack of category recognition, or indeed any indication by the authors that they were aware of other exercises in such hypothetical history-writing, indicates that these texts can only be partly illuminated by examining their publication context or contemporary cultures of reading. As described above, alternate history became specialised and ascribed to disciplinary fields later—and this recognition and absorption within genres marks the end of what I have termed ‘emergence’.

An example of this absorption and re-articulation of alternate history is the establishment of counterfactual history, which seems to have achieved recognition as a genre in the first collection of essays of this type, If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History (1931).14 The essay that initiated this collection, and which was included in the revised American edition of the same year,15 was one by G. M. Trevelyan, “If Napoleon Had Won the Battle of Waterloo,” which was first published in the Westminster Gazette in 1907 in response to a competition that solicited essays of that title.16 Counterfactual history, in which historians nominate moments of historical contingency and speculate as to how subsequent history might have developed otherwise, has a coherence and identity which contrasts with the diffuse and disparate character of alternate-historical thought in the nineteenth century, with its interrogations of the production, reception and necessity of recent, antique and planetary history. In this sense, we can say that it is the establishment of literary and prose forms in the early twentieth century (counterfactual history) that enables a retrospective

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12 Isaac D’Israeli, Curiosities of Literature, vol. 2 (London: G. Routledge & co, 1858), 428–38. This essay is difficult to date; vol. 2 was first published in 1824 but the essays were written much earlier, as their editor (Benjamin Disraeli) explains in his Introduction to Volume 1.
13 Holford, Aristopia: A Romance-History of the New World, 3.
15 John Collings Squire and Philip Guedalla, eds., If; or, History Rewritten (New York: The Viking press, 1931).
awareness of the less distinct and less easily classifiable precursors to those recognisable and distinct forms. This study of alternate history in the nineteenth century will note the increased frequency of these texts in the period, as well as the range of questions they responded to and the diversity of contexts in which they appeared. My investigation thus deflects questions of the origination of alternate history (which took place prior to the nineteenth century), and of category distinctions which arise when a genre can be recognised as such (which, as mentioned, occurred later than the period of investigation). It does, however, confront the question of how genres of writing are formed, that is to say the production of literary history, itself a process of retrospective arrangement. Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on the historical character of literary criticism are especially relevant here and I will be drawing on his writings on literature as “an organon of history” to frame my claims for alternate history’s emergence.17

My study of alternate history comprises five chapters, excluding this Introduction and the Conclusion. The first chapter explains the three contextual frames in which the thesis operates. The first of these is as a complement to recent critical work on alternate history as a category of fiction and film / TV in the latter part of the twentieth century. This scholarship represents current critical formulations of the category of alternate history, and takes as its primary material the works which are consciously produced to belong in the genre of alternate history. By reviewing the scholarly literature on alternate history, I will demonstrate how this analysis would benefit from a longer historical view of alternate history as a format. The second frame is the development of History as a discipline, a process which has received considerable attention in intellectual histories of the nineteenth century, and is usually described as the change from romantic history-writing, with Thomas Carlyle as its most representative practitioner, to a positivist, scientific discipline with the establishment of the English Historical Review in 1886 as a key marker of this change. This historical and historiographical frame is the most important context for the thesis—the movement of history-writing from an activity whose closest allegiance was to the study of literature, to one which denied affinity with the past and likewise the possibility of the return of cultural values.

The title of this thesis reflects this eclipse of cyclical historiography by a linear, positivist model; “arrange” means to draw up in a line or rank (Old French, “rang”), but another etymology gives the Old High German word for “ring” (“hring”). The arrangement of history in the nineteenth century moves from a circular to a linear model. The most common sense of “arrange” is to put things in their proper order, and the third frame for the first

chapter is a literary-theoretical one, instigated by Foucault, that historical thought became the overarching hermeneutic model in the nineteenth-century—as explained in his appropriately titled *The Order of Things* (1966). I identify problems with Foucault’s claims for the sudden permeation of knowledge areas by historical thought, and attempt to resolve these difficulties by turning to Walter Benjamin’s suggestions that the meanings of texts and artworks are to be found in history, in their afterlives. Benjamin’s identification of the critic as she or he who creatively fashions a work’s intelligibility provides a model of criticism both suited and sensitive to a study of the emergence of a literary category. Finally, this literature review chapter will turn to Darko Suvin’s provocative description of utopian literature as the “sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction” and challenge the assumption in his and Fredric Jameson’s writings that utopian literature is prevailingly futurist. Instead, I argue, there is a tendency in utopian thought to return to the possibilities of the past (as has been theorised in the work of Ernst Bloch and Susan Buck-Morss), one which encourages us to think about history differently, which is of course the key operation of alternate history with its particular method for arranging the past.

The second chapter examines the cluster of alternate histories that respond to the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte. The central text for this chapter is the first unequivocal alternate history; that is to say, the first narrative of events placed within an explicitly alternate-historical setting, as opposed to the counterfactual conjectures of a historian as to what might have happened if a particular event had happened otherwise. *Napoléon et la Conquête du Monde* (Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Chateâu, 1836) documents the formation of a global monarchy, achieved by a Napoleon who does not stop at Moscow—as the Napoleon of our timeline is known to have done. The fantasy, however, is undermined by moments of absurdity, for example Napoleon’s discovery of a unicorn, and I identify the text as belonging to the critical-reflexive mode of alternate history, one whose central concern is the nature of historical desires. Napoleon was a figure whose impact upon public consciousness produced visions of historical alterity on both sides of the Channel, and I historicise Geoffroy-Chateâu’s text by drawing on earlier fabulations of Napoleon by which he was already established as a malleable and polysemous figure to be fabricated and appropriated for political or economic interests. These include his significance in the Stock Exchange scandal of 1814, and his period of captivity aboard the Bellerophon in Plymouth Sound in 1815, when he was an object of intense popular attention in Britain. Rival political factions disputed which literary and historical parallels could be applied to his fate, with comparisons made with figures as diverse

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18 *The Order of Things* was the title he gave to the 1970 republication of his work from 1966, *An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. 
as Satan and William of Orange. The rival references to myth and history made Napoleon an imaginary Being who was repeatedly refashioned, and the pamphleteering culture in which these contestations took place locates the start of the persistent attachment of alternate histories to Napoleon. The late-century alternate histories which return to Napoleonic history demonstrate the turn at this time toward military-historical counterfactuals.

Two reworkings of the inheritance of antiquity for western culture and politics are the principal texts of the third chapter. I examine two works which change history to make claims about the proper religious legacy of the Middle East for the modern world. The first is Benjamin Disraeli’s novel, *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (1833), and the title of the second work, by the French philosopher Charles Renouvier, translates in full as *Uchronie (Utopia in History): An Apocryphal Historical Sketch of the Development of European Civilization as it Was Not, but as it Might Have Been* (1876). The two authors make precisely opposed arguments about the role of religion for modern politics: Disraeli inserts a quality of unfulfilled messianism into twelfth-century Judaic history, which he suggests may be reclaimed in England. Renouvier’s intervention is to constrain the politically disruptive force of Christianity during the reign of Marcus Aurelius in the second century AD. What follows is a European history not dissimilar from the one that we know, but in which the sufferings from religious persecution are mitigated; the argument, we infer from the text and from Renouvier’s other writings, is for a clear separation between the spheres of religion and secular rule.

Both writers engage a historiographical model of which their texts are illustrative. Despite its ironies, Disraeli’s early novel falls within the romantic-utopian model for the way it wishes to identify (or implant) a promise into history which awaits recovery in the present. I will be reading Disraeli’s letters during the period of his tour of the Middle East, at the time when *Alroy* was conceived, to look at the affinities between the ambitions of Alroy and of Disraeli himself. *Uchronie* belongs to the critical-reflexive mode, not least for the way that the narrative confounds its premise: history is not so very altered by the alternate-historical intervention; its forces, we learn, are less malleable and possess a momentum that cannot be redirected so easily as by the alteration of mere events. I will be referring to his writings on the philosophy of history to elucidate the historiography at work here. The two texts are hedged with elaborate editorial apparatus and present their narratives as found documents that have been delivered to the modern reader via a number of editors, who have provided explanatory footnotes to the texts. Both texts are complicated as a result, but this *edited* quality illuminates the connections in both texts between the alterations of the historical past and the

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20 ‘England’, not ‘Britain’ better describes Disraeli’s view of the nation he belonged to.
process by which the historian ‘edits’ the past from the primary documents that he or she finds.

The fourth chapter examines the presence of alternate-historical thought in the nineteenth-century plurality-of-worlds debate. Louis Auguste Blanqui’s prison pamphlet of 1872, *L’éternité par les astres*, draws the conclusion from nebular theory and the spectrum analysis of stars that a finite number of elements in an infinity of time requires that history in all its permutations has been, and will be forever be, repeated throughout the universe. Starting from Thomas Chalmers’s anxieties regarding the imagination of other worlds and their civilizations, I point out the under-acknowledged historical dimension to the plurality debate. At stake in the idea of ongoing planetary formation, asserted by advocates of the nebular hypothesis, is the decentring of human history in the universe. I place Blanqui’s pamphlet in the context of a ‘fanciful’ strain to this branch of Astronomy—as evidenced in the responses of writers such as Thomas De Quincey to astronomical discoveries, and in the conjectural interludes and texts by professional astronomical writers such as Richard Proctor and Camille Flammarion. Another aspect of the plurality debate, especially after spectroscopy seemed to resolve the question of nebulae’s composition, is the tendency of optical technologies to encourage imaginative ‘self-projection’ of astronomers into the cosmos, and to conceive the interplanetary observation of the histories of other worlds: others are gazing at us as we gaze at them. In the case of Blanqui, this contemplation of our other selves represents an imprisonment, a desolate removal from the lives we might have led. (For Blanqui, writing in prison during the time of the Paris Commune this would have had a particular poignancy.) *L’éternité par les astres* is a bitter example of the critical-reflexive mode of alternate history. This tendency to project history into the cosmos has a significant relation to another literary category that imagines alterity on other planets—science fiction. But I also link Blanqui’s text with a sceptical historiography that emerged in the 1870s, in particular in Nietzsche’s second *Meditation*, which identifies a bourgeois complacency in modern society’s faith in the progress of which technology was the highest proof.

The fifth and final chapter of the thesis finds a recapitulation of the three patterns of alternate history in the Victorian fin de siècle. I read Richard Jefferies’ *After London* (1885), William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) and H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895) as examples of the romantic-utopian, critical-reflexive and linear-chronological modes of alternate history respectively. This requires, first, the justification for reading them as alternate histories at all, which will be done through close examination of their temporal dynamics. In *News from Nowhere*, for example, I claim that Nowhere is consciously presented as the receptacle of Morris’s historical ideals, recognised as such. We see most clearly in these three
works the figures of the garden, the map and the dial as illustrative of the texts’ historiographical modes. These figurations of temporal patterns remind us that for Victorian writers, historical difference could be understood as a spatial remove. By establishing these works, all of which appear to be distinctive to the late-century, as the culmination of strands of historical thought that persisted throughout the nineteenth century, we are able to read them in a new way: as the final utterances of alternate history in the nineteenth century rather than the flowering of new literary sensibilities. By emphasising the historiographical and ideological difference between romantic-utopian and critical-reflexive ways of interpreting history, and a linear-chronological one, we can challenge Darko Suvin’s subordination of utopian literature to science fiction’s technologically ‘realist’ practice of anticipating the future.

The contribution of this thesis to scholarship is in the identification of alternate history as an important and under-recognised literary category, which has never yet been the subject of extended study. Its importance lies in the richness and sophistication of reflection upon the process of writing history that this particular format contains and enables. By making transformations of nineteenth-century historiography the historical context for the study, we are able to recognise the complex, contested and—during the period—contingent nature of those changes to History itself, in a way that contributes to the reconsideration of objectivist History as an inevitable outcome of the discipline’s progress in the nineteenth century. My study also provides a specific perspective on literary-historical concepts such as origination and emergence, which contributes to the necessary problematisation of a version of literary history that describes change through patterns of inevitable causation and development.
Chapter 1
The Afterlives of Nineteenth-century Alternate History

An investigation of alternate history writing in the nineteenth century is only made possible by the proliferation of the category in the twentieth. In the format’s more recent iterations we find multiple alternate outcomes to the American, English Civil and World Wars (among others); there are also narratives of Abraham Lincoln’s impeachment and of vampires who commission Orson Welles to produce a film version of Dracula. Uchronia.net consists of an assiduously compiled and ongoing bibliography of alternate histories and their criticism, and includes well over 3,000 sources. The site records each text’s publication details, the date of its counterfactual ‘divergence’, and its ‘What if’ hypothesis: “What If: The dinosaur extinction event never occurred and there exist in the present day sentient races of saurians and mammals.”

This twentieth-century corpus of literature is not the subject of my study, but rather the precondition for an inquiry into earlier iterations of the alternate-historical format. Nineteenth-century alternate history must be recognised as a retrospective category, made visible by its afterlives, and the task of identifying its emergence in the nineteenth century must look for instances of historical alteration practised as experiments rather than understood to be a category. The texts that emerge are, on the surface, only loosely connected: they belong to very different genres and registers (historical romances, philosophical and astronomical tracts, a minor self-published naval thriller). This thesis will show that these texts constitute an emergent pattern of historical speculation that by the end of the nineteenth century would overflow into utopian literature, become absorbed into science fiction, mutate into counterfactual history-writing in the early twentieth century, and coalesce as a populist literature of speculative fantasy in the contemporary literary landscape. In order to make such claims, I will review the scholarly literature on twentieth-century alternate history, and establish another frame for the investigation: that of the nineteenth-century intellectual context in which the historical past could be rewritten as fiction. The chapter will also present the conceptual basis for this study’s literary-historical method of initiating a search for the format’s precursors by acknowledging its ‘afterlives’—then argue that those precursors’ relationship with their epigones is tenuous and characterised by difference rather than filiation.

1 http://www.uchronia.net/bib.cgi/label.html?id=andedestro#7
Scholarly engagement with the subject of alternate history in the nineteenth century is complicated by its non-existence as an established field, both as a body of primary texts (there has been no attempt to justify and define a canon of alternate history in this period), and for secondary criticism (no such study has yet been undertaken). Furthermore, my identification of works that ‘belong’ to alternate history in the nineteenth century leads to a collection of writings that resist classification according to formal groupings: for example, I include a satirical pamphlet that makes an alternate-historical claim in order to respond to Hume’s philosophical scepticism, as well as short stories and novels (or novelistic texts). Also, as an incipient category that precedes alternate history ‘proper’, I will be working with some texts whose alternate-historical character is implicit rather than explicit; this applies, for example, to Benjamin Disraeli’s The Wondrous Tale of Alroy (1833) and to Richard Jefferies’s After London (1885).

A process of triangulation is required, one which corresponds to the sections of this literature review chapter. I first identify critical work on alternate-historical literature and film of the twentieth century in order to show how these analyses fail to account for the patterns of historical thought that animate and underpin alternate histories written in the previous century. My claim is that this scholarship would benefit from an examination of the emergence of the format—not only to produce a literary history of the category, but to historicise the conditions of historical thought in the early- to mid-nineteenth century that made such forays into imaginary pasts possible and purposeful. The second section presents the historiographical context of alternate history in the nineteenth century, and argues that narratives of the transformation of history-writing from a literary to a scientific tradition tend to be overly schematic—a criticism which the appearance of alternate-historical texts helps to substantiate. In trying to account for the emergence of History as a positivist discipline by the end of the century, cultural histories of the period emphasise various axes of development, such as the decline of providential thought or the professionalisation of academic disciplines; but these accounts are always confronted with the contestations taking place within the practice of history-writing at this time, as well as the heterogeneity and fluidity of historiographical values at play in the work of, for example, Thomas Carlyle, on whom this section will draw for illustration. Most importantly, narratives of the development of nineteenth-century historiography do not do justice to the self-awareness and diversity of the alternate-historical texts of the period in terms of their content and contexts. The third section of the chapter will then provide a conceptual framework for thinking about the way that the precursors to an established field of literary production become retrospectively visible, even if their subsequent analysis leads to an extraction of the earlier texts from a relationship of
genealogical descent with their latter-day manifestations that enabled the precursors’ visibility in the first place. The final section of this chapter draws an inference from this proposition that earlier alternate histories need to be divorced from their apparent epigones. I take issue with critical interpretations of science fiction that seek to absorb into it earlier literary fields such as utopian literature, a view encapsulated and initiated by Darko Suvin’s provocative claim that “utopia is not a genre but the sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction.” Alternate history provides material to counter these critical expansions of science fiction: its characteristic orientation toward the past excludes it from SF’s trait of technological anticipation, and my account of alternate history’s trajectory through the nineteenth century as an ongoing examination—ultimately an exhaustion—of romantic historiography also divorces those earlier utopias from the new worlds of science fiction.

Before proceeding, it will be helpful to offer some clarification of the various terms used to refer to alternate history and related types of writing. ‘Alternate history’ is increasingly used by critics, such as Catherine Gallagher, to describe the presentation of histories that never happened, and ‘alternate-historical novels’ refer, obviously enough, to novels which are set in such historical scenarios and are a sub-category of alternate history itself. The adoption of the same terms by critics such as Gavriel Rosenfeld and Karen Hellekson in recent years makes alternate history the most appropriate label to use for engaging with contemporary discussion of the subject. Differing vocabulary can complicate the discussion, for example the terms ‘alternative History’ by Darko Suvin, and ‘uchronia’ by Paul Alkon. These appear in earlier critical texts, and reflect a lack of specificity: in both cases, the labels are attached to works that imagine the future, as well as the conjectural imagination of the past (alternate history ‘proper’). Paul Alkon, for example, places alternate history in a relationship with utopian literature by presenting the alternate histories, or ‘uchronias’, of Louis-Sébastien Mercier (L’An 2440) and Charles Renouvier as what followed utopias in literature and established foundations for the tradition of futuristic literature. In using the terms ‘uchronia’ and ‘alternative history’ in this way, Alkon and Suvin treat futuristic literary settings as alternate histories of the future, which extends the category beyond the scope of this study. It

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is worth pointing out an important difference between the imaginations of the past and future: the latter will always (eventually) be falsifiable, whereas alternate history is always already false or counterfactual. ‘Counterfactual’ is a term that will be used in this study, but not simply to describe historians’ practice of speculating what would or might have occurred if a particular historical event had occurred differently, as Hellekson does. The debate regarding the utility of historians’ counterfactuals is not one with which I will be engaging.

Rather, I will be following Gallagher and others in using ‘counterfactual’ in the more straightforward sense of describing the simple condition of being opposed to what took place. (The condition of being ‘counterfactual’ necessarily relates to events in the past, for the conditions of the future are not yet ‘factual’.) Alternate histories thus contain counterfactual propositions, but are distinguished from counterfactual history (the activity of historians) in that they do not adopt a detached perspective in which the writer addresses the reader and both understand that they exist in the same timeline of received history. This implied affirmation of actual history permits the author to explain the alteration being introduced and to speculate as to how or why things would have proceeded differently.

Alternate history thus refers to the presentation of histories that did not happen as if they were true histories, which means that it can also include denials of the history that is commonly accepted as true, as is the case with Richard Whately’s *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte* (1819)—an admittedly problematic formulation of alternate history, for it then bleeds into the wider category of revisionist history. Furthermore, and crucially to this study, I claim that the reflection on the idea of history having been otherwise also belongs to the category of alternate history—in other words I consider the presence of counterfactual conjectures in, for example, the nineteenth-century scientific fields of the plurality-of-worlds debate and evolutionary theory. I am not alone in taking this position, for Barton C. Hacker and Gordon B. Chamberlain’s extensive bibliography of “Pasts that Might Have Been” includes works such as Louis Auguste Blanqui’s other-worlds speculation. This also opens up alternate history to the consideration of literary works where the insertion of current wishes into the past in order to transform the perception of the present is a central dynamic or conscious concern, as is the case with Benjamin Disraeli’s novel *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy*, and William

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8 E. H. Carr’s example of how if Cleopatra’s nose had been shorter, history would have occurred differently, is a widely quoted claim for the absurdity of counterfactual speculation (Carr, *What is History?*, 1–14). An extended defence of counterfactual conjectures is provided by Niall Ferguson (Niall Ferguson, “Virtual History: Towards a ‘Chaotic’ Theory of the Past,” in *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Papermac, 1998), 1–90.
Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890). A final terminological point: ‘allohistory’ is a term used by Gallagher, and which I occasionally employ, to refer to the totality of texts which alter past history—that is to say historians’ counterfactuals as well as alternate history in its various modes.

**Recent Critical Work on Alternate History**

Gavriel Rosenfeld, Karen Hellekson and Catherine Gallagher are three scholars who have recently published on the subject of alternate history. I will start by describing the work of Rosenfeld, who has written a book-length study on the subject. In *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (2005), Rosenfeld describes the changes over time in alternate histories’ perspectives on the Nazi Holocaust. His argument is that there has been a movement from alternate-historical novels which tend to reflect the extraordinary evil of the Holocaust, to more recent alternate histories of Nazism, which “seem to indicate the emergence of an increasingly normalized view of the Nazi past within Western consciousness.”

The periodisation of this argument is that from 1945 to the 1960s there was a phase of moralism (treating the Holocaust as abnormal and morally abhorrent), and that the period from the 1960s to the date of publication has been one of gradual normalisation. It should be pointed out that normalisation is not meant to imply a view of the Holocaust as pardonable or morally ambivalent; rather, it refers to the loss of the Holocaust’s status as exceptional or abnormal—in other words, it became presented as one historical brutality among many.

In his essay “Why do We Ask ‘What If?’,” Rosenfeld charts the changes and differences in attitude that alternate-historical novels and stories express toward three historical imaginaries: the Nazis winning the Second World War, the South winning the American Civil War, and the American Revolution never taking place. All of these counterfactual premises have generated works of alternate history and all three, it should be noted, contain nexus points that emerge from military engagements—illustrating the confluence of populist alternate histories (Rosenfeld’s primary materials) and historians’ counterfactuals in the twentieth century. Rosenfeld’s central assumption that alternate-historical texts are expressive or illustrative of contemporary historical views is apparent: allohistorical works “reveal clear signs of the intensifying pace of normalisation,” “seem to indicate” the emergence of an increasingly normalized view,” “reflected” the pessimism of the era and expressed

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11 Rosenfeld, “Why Do We Ask ‘What If?’”.
12 It is worth observing that alternate histories in the nineteenth century tend not to foreground the point of departure from received history; it is either elided or downplayed, as is consistent with the characteristic presentation of the alternate histories in this period as if they were real.
dissatisfaction with the present,” and “illustrate the fading intensity of the fears and fantasies that originally inspired them.” But this treatment of the novels as symptomatic of widely held views does not do justice to their dissensual capacity that Rosenfeld’s own analysis clearly demonstrates. In alternate-historical novels on a Nazi victory written prior to US engagement, the function of the texts was to move America toward military commitment earlier than might have been the case without these polemical scenarios, if at all. His examples of the ideological differences between Sobel’s and Dreyfus & Turtledove’s contrasting imaginations of an America that did not achieve independence from Britain demonstrate contestation between divergent positions which, importantly, are played out within the texts, and are not simply indicative of subjectivities outside of them.

It is valuable to extend the possibility of agency to alternate-historical texts, and to think of this agency as acting upon the audience for whom they were intended. At the risk of over-elaborating the implied effect of a polemical alternate history which alters the past in order to advocate a course of action in the present, each text of this kind redoubles the number of historical trajectories through the fact of being written. Robert Sobel’s *For Want of a Nail* (1973) not only imagines that the American rebellion collapsed, it also implies a view of American history in which the importance and value of independence continues to be insufficiently valued and in which Sobel’s book is not written, or at least sufficiently recognised. Rosenfeld’s use of the texts for historical analysis tends to overlook the leverage which arguments about the past in literary form can seek to apply; this is the consequence of an approach that treats the texts as merely reflective or indicative of changing opinions. Exponents of alternate history in the nineteenth century were acutely aware that their works were engaged in a process of refashioning the relationship of the past with the present through the retrospective insertion of desires and ambitions. In this sense they should be seen as reflexive upon, rather than reflective of, the valorisation of past history.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that Rosenfeld sees alternate history as a recent phenomenon: “Besides scattered time-travel short stories published in pulp science-fiction magazines, and scholarly essays published in larger anthologies, few alternate histories appeared until the 1960s.” The rise of alternate history is associated by Rosenfeld with the arrival of postmodernity, with three dimensions of postmodern thought identified as amenable to alternate history: its post-ideological resistance to determinism, its willingness to blur historical periods and categories, and its privileging of subjectivist or relativist approaches.

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14 Rosenfeld, “Why Do We Ask "What If?,” 92.
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to historical knowledge.¹⁵ Two objections might be raised here: first, we could easily identify a scepticism toward determinism prior to twentieth-century post-war ideologies of history; it is this and other historiographical debates in the nineteenth century that I take as the context for alternate history and its interrogations of the historical past. There are also fairly obvious examples of the past and present having been tactically overlaid, not least Carlyle’s work that takes those terms for its title—*Past and Present* (1843)—in which the chronicle of a twelfth-century monk is shown to be instructive for the problems afflicting mid-nineteenth-century England.¹⁶ We could also recall invocations of the past such as the adoption of Roman togas by late eighteenth-century French republicans, and the claims of cyclical historical development that this costume implied. If several or all of these dimensions of postmodern thought were iterated prior to postmodernity, then the appeal to postmodernity serves better to explain the rise in alternate history consumption than the possibility of conceiving alternate histories at all, which belongs to a longer tradition. This thesis will correct that periodisation by discovering a sophistication of historical thought—an awareness of the fluidity of historical concepts and values—in an earlier period.

Karen Hellekson produces a very different argument about alternate history novels by claiming that alternate history, despite its distinctiveness as a literary category, is to be evaluated according to the same criterion as counterfactual history: the realism of its conjectures. She writes that “the best kind of alternate history is the one concerned most intimately with plausible causal relationships.”¹⁷ This early assumption shapes her investigation and has the effect of dismissing the nineteenth-century precursors to the genre, which often embrace the fanciful excesses of this type of past-historical imagination, for example in Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Château’s *Napoléon et la Conquête du Monde* (1836). It also seems to run against the character of the genre to judge the presentation of impossible pasts on the basis of plausibility. Hellekson explicitly conflates alternate history and counterfactual speculation: “Though the alternate history began as a literature concerned with social commentary, as were the texts by Geoffroy-Chateau [*sic*] and Renouvier, the genre quickly combined with historians’ counterfactuals.”¹⁸ I claim in this study that prior to the conflation that did take place toward the end of the nineteenth century, alternate history was often explicitly opposed to the linear-chronological understanding of history that did come to dominate the category later.

¹⁵ Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made*, 6; Rosenfeld, “Why Do We Ask "What If?,” 92.
Equally clear is Hellekson’s determination to treat alternate history in the twentieth century as a phenomenon to be examined on its own rather than in relation to its earlier expressions. Her concentration on how alternate history operated from the twentieth century onwards is representative of a tendency in alternate history scholarship to do little more than nod to the existence of the nineteenth-century texts that founded the category. Furthermore, the absence of a clear articulation of the relationship between ‘alternate’ and ‘counterfactual’ history prior to this period demonstrates the difficulties that will confront an analysis that fails to address this distinction. The usefulness of her schematisation of four “models of history” as a framework for the analysis is also open to question. Drawing on Hayden White’s categorisation of historical modes in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), she presents a similar schema of four modes of alternate history, which are “the eschatological, genetic, entropic, and teleological.”19 But having established that alternate history is and should be concerned with plausible historical causation leads her to make the point that “the genetic model lies at the heart of every alternate history because the alternate history relies on cause and effect.”20 By producing a framework of the genre that yokes historical speculation to a single genetic model of history that is linear-chronological (cause and effect), she overlooks the heterogeneity of historiographical positions that animates alternate history and upon which it is able to comment from the unique position of its defining historical conceit. By recognising multiple historiographical positions (the romantic-utopian, the critical-reflexive and linear-chronological), this study will avoid the reductions that result from imposing a master model by which to interpret on alternate history.

Hellekson discovers a taxonomy of three types of alternate history: “(1) the nexus story, which includes time-travel–time-policing stories and battle stories; (2) the true alternate history, which may include alternate histories that posit different physical laws; (3) the parallel worlds story.”21 This is an attractively neat separation that distinguishes between the texts that Hellekson considers; what is striking, however, is how inappropriate this taxonomy is for nineteenth-century alternate-historical texts. Blanqui’s *L’éternité par les astres* (1872), for example, is a pamphlet on celestial chemistry and a thesis for the existence of an infinite number of other worlds. It is also a philosophical meditation on the complacent belief in historical progress that he perceived as a contemporary failure. What this and other texts tend to demonstrate is the multiplicity of categories at work in the format, which makes them difficult to contain within taxonomies based on differentiation of internal or topographical features. Any attempt to establish a taxonomy that describes the emergence of the category in

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the nineteenth century will have to turn to other qualities. This study will differentiate alternate-historical texts according to their temporal frame (the recent, classical and planetary pasts), and their historiographical orientation (the romantic-utopian, the critical-reflexive, and the linear chronological).

Catherine Gallagher’s recent work on alternate history is more sensitive to the interaction between historical alteration and historical interpretation. She proposes a nuanced articulation of literary allohistory (alternate-historical novels and stories) and historians’ allohistories (counterfactual speculation) by identifying different orders of plausibility in the two categories. In “When Did the Confederate States of America Free the Slaves?” she begins by questioning the basis on which it is possible to find counterfactual scenarios unrealistic—not in the sense of criticising the very act of counterfactual speculation, but in questioning whether the plausibility of imaginary consequences is an important criterion for judging the value of an alternate history. What this introduces is a distinction between the privileging of history’s ‘nexus points’ by counterfactual historians (generally military conflicts) and a recognition of the longer term processes which underlie and challenge such evental history. She writes of the “sense that, beneath the superficial causes of national events, there lay deeper forces impelling us in a certain direction.”

What the practice of alternate-historical speculation can make visible is the disjuncture between these two forms of historical interpretation—evental and long-durational. The historiographical stakes of alternate history are thus recognised, not subsumed into the category of counterfactual speculations with their assumption of history as causes and immediate effects. She gives the example of General Lee’s lost order, a recorded event of 1862 in which a series of extremely unlikely circumstances led to the Union army discovering Confederate military strategy and—arguably—winning the war. A chain of improbable events in the historical record produces the counterintuitive proposition that what did happen was the least likely outcome.

This is an argument for the value of allohistorical speculation that does not take single historical moments as points of imagined departure from received history. Instead, allohistory can articulate the significance of these moments of historical potential (nexus points) with reflection upon how alternate outcomes at these nexus points would have impacted upon the ‘deeper forces’ of history—if at all. What is especially interesting about this observation on historical contingency is the way that a resolution emerges between a longue-durée analysis of history and an evental one. Alternate history may claim the privilege of “presenting in detail the social, cultural, technological, psychological, and emotional totalities that result from the

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alteration.”

Through the association of alternate history novels with long-durational historiography, Gallagher draws her most interesting conclusion about the scenarios in alternate history texts: “Unlike the allo-historians, the alternate-history novelists posit the ontological parity of the forks of the Y in order to indicate that their alternate worlds actually refer to our social reality.” This view is applied to the observation that several post-second-world-war novelists imagine an American defeat in the conflict that seemed to have been emphatically won: “Why in the post-war period did we begin imaginatively to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory?” In Philip K. Dick’s novel, The Man in the High Castle (1926), the interpretation of the post-war settlement is that “in some ‘essential’ way, the Allies lost the war […]. Dick implies that America and the Soviet Union lost the war because they never really ceased to be at war.” Gallagher’s position is not dissimilar to Rosenfeld’s: both critics treat the alternate histories as indicative of attitudes toward the significance of past historical events. They differ in that Rosenfeld’s work implicitly privileges the actuality of the Holocaust over its representations in alternate history which, over the course of time, serve to undermine the exceptionality and ‘real’ significance of the historical facts connected to these atrocities.

A comment of Gallagher’s on the realist historical novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries indicates a direction for critical development which this thesis will pursue. She associates the presentation of “the long-term trajectories of historic forces” with the way that historical realism in the novel could depend upon the departure from facts, especially unlikely ones. Walter Scott is given as an example of a historical-realist novelist who incorporates such departures in adopting “the task of giving plot to history.” Although Scott’s novels are outside the scope of this study, Gallagher’s point about them is important: the truths of history may be more amenable to a form of writing history that goes beyond and is more creative than the process of chronicling facts—and this insight is certainly one that was made by historians of the nineteenth century, for example Thomas Babington Macaulay, who in 1828 observed that whereas the historian can ask his readers to imagine the past.

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25 Gallagher, “War, Counterfactual History, and Alternate-History Novels,” 64.
27 Gallagher, “When Did the Confederate States of America Free the Slaves?,” 61.
28 Gallagher, “When Did the Confederate States of America Free the Slaves?,” 60. Gallagher’s comments here appear to echo Lukács’s notion of “critical realism,” whereby the truest representation of history is not one that “sticks too closely to day-to-day events” (György Lukács, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism (London: Merlin Press, 1963), 57).
differently, “fiction [...] is essentially imitative” for the way that it is obliged to operate within a conventional understanding of the past.29

Gallagher’s point, pre-empted by Macaulay, is that a departure from the received understanding of the past can be a truthful representation of history. She develops this insight in an essay on the ontological status of characters in novels and alternate history.30 Gallagher compares the representations of Napoleon by Hegel, Tolstoy and Louis Geoffroy-Château, in other words in texts which present the reader with a figure from actual history, from history treated in a historical novel, and also from an alternate-historical account in which Napoleon conducts a successful Russian campaign and goes on to establish a global monarchy. The article challenges the claim by Lubomir Doležel and others that characters in novels always imply a ‘possible world’—and that all novels exist in the in the same hypothetical space as alternate history. She claims that “the theory’s insistence that fictional characters automatically generate possible worlds runs counter to our experience when reading most novels.”31 Alternate history, rather, is distinctive for the way that it is always located in an “instead of” counterfactual scenario, unlike realist novels’ operation within the history that we understand to have actually taken place. My analysis differs by interpreting the primary texts in the context of nineteenth-century historiography, rather than considering the ontological condition of their depicted worlds. The articles by Gallagher (and her forthcoming book on the subject) establish a different approach to the emergence of alternate history, which works more on the semantic and metaphysical character of figures in alternate history by detecting its modern origins in eighteenth-century theological debates, in particular the work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Although the texts she discusses have historical contexts (Napoleonic history, the American Civil War, the Cold War), the conclusions she moves toward are extra-historical, for they deal with ontological status of characters within different types of fiction and the ability of literature that is set in counterfactual scenarios to tell the truth (however historically referential that truth may be).

From the literature reviewed so far we can differentiate between approaches: the foregrounding of formal patterns of alternate history (Hellekson), a focus on the reality-status of literary characters, with alternate history as a category of writing that illuminates wider questions of fiction and ontology (Gallagher), and a treatment of alternate history as indicative of changing attitudes toward particular historical events (Rosenfield). The first two approaches are non-historicist in their interpretation and use of alternate history, whereas Rosenfeld’s

30 Gallagher, “What Would Napoleon Do?”.
studies are overtly historicist, and by treating literary texts as evidence his analysis tends to overlook the agency and analysis that those texts themselves exercise. My own study should also be described as historicist, although its historical context is not events and attitudes toward them; rather, its context is the changes that were taking place in the production of historical knowledge in the nineteenth century. Historiography is itself a field subject to historical change, most distinctively in the nineteenth century. This period was shaped by the formation of academic disciplines as demarcated and increasingly positivist fields of knowledge. The role of History in these disciplinary transformations was both central and contested. The production of alternate histories provokes reflection upon these very transformations—for what obliges us to think about how we know what we ‘know’ about the past more directly than the assertion of historical imaginaries? The contestations taking place in nineteenth-century historiography are the most important framing context of this thesis.

**Historiography in the Nineteenth Century**

Critical accounts of history-writing in the nineteenth century rely upon a tension between the role of the historian as a sage whose interpretations of the historical record drew upon literary traditions (for example romance and epic) and as an increasingly professional figure whose methods had become scientific by the end of the period—with the first publication of *The English Historical Review* in 1886 as a significant marker in this transformation. This tension can be presented as a narrative of empirical ascendency and the decline of providentialist thought, but this view is problematised by the way that much historical writing in the nineteenth century is resistant to the various descriptions of historiography’s transition in this period from a literary to a scientific model. Rather, it is the case that examination of figures such as Carlyle and Macaulay is obliged to place them in the *space* of nineteenth-century conflict regarding the purpose and direction of history-writing at the time, a conflict which is contextualised within a narrative of progressive change that is always problematic, as the majority of critics acknowledge, and as the alternate-historical texts in this study will exemplify. This section will demonstrate how statements on how the study of history ought to be conducted exemplify countercurrents and anomalies that complicate this narrative of gradual professionalisation as the context in which to place a discussion of alternate history writing in the nineteenth century.

Michael Carignan claims that the transformation of history into a positivist discipline should be understood as a conflict between two schools, with Carlyle, Macaulay, Michelet and Froude in the literary-historical camp, and Buckle and Stubbs in the scientific-historical one; he
identifies the 1870s as the decade in which the rise of positivist history began.\footnote{32 Michael Carignan, “Analogue Reasoning in Victorian Historical Epistemology,” \textit{Journal of the History of Ideas} 64, no. 3 (July 2003): 462.} Richard W. Schoch details the break according to a similar time-scale, claiming that “the 1840s and 1850s were perhaps the last years when the boundary between English historical writing and English literature was still permeable.”\footnote{33 Richard W. Schoch, “‘We Do Nothing but Enact History’: Thomas Carlyle Stages the Past,” \textit{Nineteenth-Century Literature} 54, no. 1 (June 1999): 27.} Carignan, however, is careful to point out that historians such as Carlyle already had a view on the methodological rigour championed by Ranke, particularly regarding the historian’s use of primary sources. Carlyle’s position was that the historian’s calling was far higher than that of an archivist.\footnote{34 Carignan, “Analogue Reasoning in Victorian Historical Epistemology,” 447.} Furthermore, figures such as Burckhardt and Nietzsche expressed opposition in Switzerland and Germany to the rise of positivist historical analysis championed by Ranke.\footnote{35 Carignan, “Analogue Reasoning in Victorian Historical Epistemology,” 447.} In other words, the eventual dominance of positivist or scientific historiography is not to be glossed as a movement from error to truth—firstly because the emergence of a methodological professionalism was opposed by equally modern discourses on historical knowledge, and also because there was an existential tradition of disdain by vocational historians such as Carlyle and Macaulay toward exhaustive work with primary documents and antiquarianism in general. Rosemary Jann traces this contempt for antiquarian historiography back to the eighteenth century and Edward Gibbon, whom she quotes: “The part of an historian is as honourable as that of a mere chronicler or compiler of gazettes is contemptible.”\footnote{36 Rosemary Jann, \textit{The Art and Science of Victorian History} (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), 17.} Likewise, Carlyle expresses disdain for the antiquarian, an artisan “without eye for the whole.”\footnote{37 Thomas Carlyle, “On History,” in \textit{Critical and Miscellaneous Essays} vol. II, vol. 27, The Works of Thomas Carlyle (London: Chapman & Hall, 1896), 90.} The thesis of a gradual move toward positivism in nineteenth-century historiography is also problematised by Christopher Parker’s claim that Carlyle had converted his disciples J. A. Froude and W. H. Lecky from positivism.\footnote{38 Christopher Parker, “Thomas Carlyle: A ‘Chaos of Being’ and Heroism,” in \textit{The English Idea of History from Coleridge to Collingwood} (Aldershot & Burlington Vt.: Ashgate, 2000), 33–60.}

The difficulty of plotting a historiographical movement toward a supposed rigour is further complicated by Jann’s questioning of the historiographical categories into which figures such as Ranke and Carlyle are placed: the descriptions of Carlyle’s lack of historical scholarship have been overstated, according to Jann, and it would be more accurate to say that what became obsolete was his understanding of history as “essentially metaphorical and symbolic.”\footnote{39 Jann, \textit{The Art and Science of Victorian History}, 34.} Jann also qualifies a reception of Ranke as purely positivist, claiming that, although he insisted on the use of primary sources, there was a romantic sympathy with these
sources. Ann Rigney contributes to this discussion by pointing out the ways in which Carlyle’s use of primary sources was self-aware: he derived a sense of the sublime from the vastness and obscurity of the historical record—which he described as “shoreless chaos” in his introduction to *Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches*. This sublimity was both an aesthetic effect that rendered the historian’s work more heroic, but could also be used to provide cover for the very deliberate omissions from particular sources of which Carlyle was guilty: “the attribution of disorder becomes a way of legitimizing ignorance.” These comments may seem to support a relegation of Carlyle to a pre-professional period of historiography, but Rigney also suggests that Carlyle’s interest in the uneventful reality of those who were witnesses rather than agents in historical processes suggests an anticipation of the ‘new history’ that would appear in twentieth-century movements such as the Annales school.

A periodisation of early-nineteenth-century history-writing as romantic, in contrast to a scientific approach in the latter part of the century, is inconsistent with many of the primary texts themselves. In his 1828 review of Henry Neele’s lectures on “The Romance of History” from the previous year, Macaulay celebrates the technological and organisational achievements of the age and the concomitant advances in historical method—particularly in the widening scope of historical research. He lists the factors that should be included in an analysis of the Civil War:

> The austerity of the Presbyterian Sabbaths in the city, the extravagance of the independent preachers in the camp, the precise garb, the severe countenance, the petty scruples, the affected accent, the absurd names and phrases which marked the Puritans,—the valour, the policy, the public spirit, which lurked beneath these ungraceful disguises, the dreams of the raving Fifth-monarchy-man, the dreams, scarcely less wild, of the philosophic republican,—all these would enter into the representation, and render it at once the more exact and more striking.

This sense of historical knowledge as a total knowledge of the past also appears in Philip Harwood’s *Westminster Review* essay of 1842:

> The meanest and commonest things become historical: nothing is too lowly to furnish data for historic science. The successive aspects of national manners; statistics of education, disease and crime; every imaginable description of facts and figures—in general, whatever throws light on the domestic habits, the

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economical condition, the ways of living and doing of a people, is now asserting and establishing a place for itself in history.\textsuperscript{44}

Harwood goes as far as welcoming the coming "euthanasia of history in science"—but this new science should not be glossed as the rise of empiricism. "The modern student of humanity in history," he writes, "must speculate and philosophise."\textsuperscript{45} The striking feature is the awareness that History is a discipline in transition, and must refashion its own basis for knowledge of the past; Harwood calls for a "History of History," and for an understanding of "the cause of the causes of all historic effects."\textsuperscript{46} The rhetoric of the claims for a History to become a positivist discipline becomes more strident in Henry Thomas Buckle’s introduction to his History of Civilization in England (1857-61):

If any facts, or class of facts, have not yet been reduced to order, we, so far from pronouncing them to be irreducible, should rather be guided by our experience of the past, and should admit the probability that what we now call inexplicable will at some future time be explained.\textsuperscript{47}

Buckle, certainly, is adopting a position opposed to Macaulay’s claim that “facts are the mere dross of history”;\textsuperscript{48} but one can be sceptical of Buckle’s accusation that previous historians had applied a “narrow standard” in their investigations.\textsuperscript{49} Indeed, it is the breadth of historiographical scope indicated in Harwood’s article that reflects the breadth of perspectives on the use of history, and the susceptibility of the past to rearrangement that will be also be found in alternate-historical texts in the nineteenth century. When Harwood approvingly quotes Michelet’s claim that “the myths and poetry of barbarous peoples […] are in fact the true history of a people, as its genius determined it to be conceived,”\textsuperscript{50} he is expressing a view that had reached English historians such as Thomas Arnold from Barthold Georg Niebuhr, that the character of peoples and nations were “constituted by ideas rather than acts.”\textsuperscript{51} Arnold repeats the idea of “genius,” equating it with racial character in his 1841 inaugural lecture as Regius Chair at Oxford when he states that the literature and culture of a nation indicate its character in the way that the private letters of an individual do the same at the level of

\textsuperscript{49} Buckle, History of Civilisation in England, 1:4.
\textsuperscript{50} Harwood, “The Modern Art and Science of History,” 347.
biography.52 For Carlyle, Macaulay, Harwood and Arnold, the most telling documents of the past may be those that record myths and legends.

Instead of posing an opposition between and movement from ‘art’ to ‘science’, Hayden White and Rosemary Jann contribute to the discussion of changes in nineteenth-century historiography by suggesting that a form of history-writing emerged in the mid-century which attempted to negotiate the empiricism of scientific investigation on one side and the value of creative representation on the other.53 White presents a self-conscious attempt by historians of the time to reconcile the growing opposition between literary-romantic and scientific-positivist spheres of knowledge, and claims that History might legitimately claim to occupy a neutral middle ground on the basis of which “‘two cultures’ might be brought together and reunited in common service to the goals of civilized society.”54 By positing a historiographical tradition in the early- to mid-century that was not a waypoint on the journey from literary to scientific history, but rather an attempt to form an approach that combined both, a description of historiography in the longer nineteenth century emerges in which “the watershed for the shift in historiographical models was the French Revolution.”55

Jann takes the view that historians such as Carlyle and Macaulay accorded with the eighteenth-century philosophes’ antagonism toward the barbarity of the past, but that the descent of the French Revolution into its own barbarity had shown how an understanding of historical processes needed to move from knowledge by principle to knowledge from exemplary illustrations—and that this movement drew on literary models which “shaped [historical] professionalism in unique ways.”56 Mark Phillips takes a similar view, with a slightly different emphasis, by asserting that in the historical novel, “[historians] encountered the literary imagination in its most immediate and perhaps threatening form.”57

White subscribes to a view of the historian as a “mediator between the arts and sciences”—but only for the period from 1800 to 1850, after which the pressures of professionalisation and specialisation made this role no longer tenable.58 This mediating role implies a meta-disciplinary position, from which various fields of knowledge can be examined and articulated, and is exemplified by the project, already quoted in Harwood, of finding a

54 White, Metahistory, 137.
“History of History.” White identifies this as an intermediary period in the passage from enlightenment principles to empirical science, a hiatus in which literary fiction informed historical investigation and the values of rigorous archival work were not opposed to an imaginative rendering of the past. There is, certainly, a subsumption, or “euthanasia,” of the prophetic role of the historian as sage by the avowed values of modern historiography, summarised by Harwood as “the comprehensiveness, impartiality, the depth and breadth of view at which modern history aims,” and most bullishly proclaimed by Buckle. Harwood describes this emerging consciousness of history as a “New Science.”

This aspiration for complete historical knowledge is very different from the “Universal History” that Carlyle advocated in “On History Again.” For Carlyle, the metahistorical task of extracting meaning from the records of the past is superior to the work of the mere antiquarian, and is threatened by the “Mechanical tendencies” and division of labour of modern society. It is, however, constraining to see the conflicted role of History solely in terms of a struggle between romantic beliefs about the past and scientific empiricism. This study will argue that alternate histories always operate in dialogue between History and other disciplines; with, for example, the speed of publishing that characterised journalism (as Carlyle recognised), and also with the recalibration of time that resulted from discoveries in the biological and astronomical sciences. To observe the importance of Science’s accelerated and protracted temporalities to History is not new, but whereas authors such as Gissing and Hardy incorporated the speed and slowness of modernity and its scientific discoveries into their novels, alternate history is a format that is able to reflect the significance and proximity of the past within these different temporal frames: the question of what might have been can be staged in relation to the latest news bulletin, or by thinking about the formation of star systems. The variations in alternate history are, in part, a function of the knowledge field with which they engage, be it journalism, Archaeology or nebular theory. They thus alert us to the way in which historiographical debates were enmeshed in a variety of other disciplines and cultural fields. In other words, I will be taking White’s idea of History as a mediating discipline from 1800 to 1850, but applying this to alternate history and extending the range beyond this period to encompass relationships between areas of knowledge beyond a conflict between Art and Science.

White’s most influential insight into the historiography of the nineteenth century was to associate literary genres and techniques with history-writing, and his analysis of historical emplotment is appealing to an examination of alternate history’s particular narrative conceit. Karen Hellekson transposed his four types of emplotment from *Metahistory* as four types of alternate history. We might question White’s claim that it was only after Hegel that a conscious distinction between historiography and the philosophy of history emerged, and that “to have suggested that the historian emplotted his stories would have offended most nineteenth-century historians.”  

Carlyle explicitly signals such awareness when he states: “History, then, before it can become Universal History, needs of all things to be compressed.”  

This compression or shaping of history was closely aligned with the pursuit of an ethical relationship with the past, and again it should be emphasised that at the time this was not inimical to empiricism, as expressed in the claim that “there is a science of moral, as well as of material archaeology.”  

What Carlyle described as the need for “compression” points toward both the recourse to literature for the means of selecting and framing material, and also the moral, educative role of the romantic historian of the nineteenth century. As Heyck says of history-writing at this time, “it takes a good man rather than a specially trained expert to write good history.”  

Jann writes that “believing that the essential truths of man’s past were spiritual rather than material, [the romantic historian] needed imagination in order to recover them.”  

Moral purpose and narrative form become inseparable; the effectiveness of the historian lies in his deployment of literary techniques to build a narrative that was both compelling and instructive for its audience, for example Carlyle’s use of the present tense to place readers of *The French Revolution* in the midst of events, and his movement from cultural critique to historical account in *Past and Present*. The moral force of historical writing becomes dependent on stylistic techniques and decisions of presentational form.  

This phase of historiography establishes the conditions for alternate history. Harwood wrote that “the historic, scientific imagination” was the faculty that could “recreate worlds out of the loose, chaotic elements furnished by chroniclers and bards.”  

Such a view is particularly interesting for this study as it treats the creative interpretation of history and literary production of worlds as the result of an approach to history that is as scientific as it is poetic. It is tempting to see here an incipient science-fiction, but rather than subordinate this idea of

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64 White, *Metahistory*, 142.  
new historical worlds to a genre of fiction that imagined the possibility of actual travel to these other worlds in space or time, I would rather associate Harwood’s comments with the productions of alternate history. Macaulay boasts of the fascination that historical writing could exert over the imagination when he wrote that when a historical work was published, “the new novel lies uncut.”70 He also, as already quoted, claimed that History is able to challenge assumptions, unlike fiction, which is “essentially imitative.”71 Isaac D’Israeli had already commented on the capacity of history to transform the reception of the past when he described a new form of historical scholarship enabled by the recent decision to make state papers available to researchers: “Secret history is the supplement of history itself, and is its great corrector; and the combination of secret with public history has in itself a perfection, which each taken separately has not.”72 The resultant historiography (“that subterraneous history”) was a type of historical revisionism that was able to claim a more detailed knowledge of events and the inclinations of historical actors through examination of primary materials. Just as works of fiction can simulate historical actuality by presenting themselves as discovered letters, so alternate history can endow its fictions with the apparatus and writerly conventions of historical realism, for example found documents (Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte, The Wondrous Tale of Alroy, It May Happen Yet: A Tale of Bonaparte’s Invasion of England, Uchronie).

Works such as Alroy can be read either as secret or alternate histories; slippage between the these two categories should not be taken as a contradiction within alternate history; it is one of its defining features. The idea of redemptive historiography relies upon precisely the same indistinction, for if history contains moments of unredeemed potential, then a project of reclamation can be utopian in a very different way from the call for society to work toward a particular future; this is the case with Alroy, Uchronie, After London and News from Nowhere. It will require the assertion that this potential lies dormant and concealed in the present. The specific capacity of alternate history in its critical-reflexive mode is to create an ironic, self-aware perspective of the present from outside itself, from a past which is both alternate and secret. Jann claims that in the case of Carlyle, a denunciation of the present-day situation could be compatible with the eternal and supernatural values of humankind through a redemptive historiography which told stories to make these values visible amidst the wreckage of the present.74 Carlyle made the recuperative and ameliorative function of history for mankind explicit: “The wisdom, the heroic worth of our forefathers, which we have lost, we

73 D’Israeli, Curiosities of Literature, 3:393.
can recover [...]. Man may again be all that he has been, and more than he has ever been.”75 When the process of “recovery” depends upon the creative faculties of the historian, and the effectiveness of the recovery is tied up in the adoption of literary strategies, then the historiographical context for alternate history is apparent, for it also ‘forges’ past realities in order to recover them, and does so by adopting literary modes of emplotment.

Robin Gilmour draws attention to the circulation of metahistorical ideas in this period, identifying reformulations by Saint-Simon and Comte of Hegel’s schemes of historical progress.76 What is important here is the availability of metahistorical concepts to Victorian history-writers, which enabled historical progress to be thought of as developmental in different ways, whether as Hegel’s thesis-antithesis-synthesis, or St Simon’s and Comte’s similarly three-part movements toward a Golden or Scientific age respectively.77 If history is understood as cyclical, or as a process of advance and retreat, then the present can be interpreted as historically aberrant—as a deviation from an overall direction toward a teleological destination, or from a particular historical moment treated as a missed opportunity. This not only applies to historical cycles that may be recovered to a greater or lesser degree (this is the romantic historiography of Carlyle and others); historical aberrance also makes sense within an idea of historical development as a series of bifurcations—or, in Borges’ expression, as a “garden of forking paths.”78 The influence of evolutionary theory upon this figure for history will be considered in Chapter 4, but for now I will say only that this model is amenable both to alternate histories that emphasise moments of contingency, and which take a long-durational view of history. Its primary affinity, however, is with alternate-historical texts that critique or adopt a view of history as linear-chronological, such as H. G. Wells’s The Time Machine. An important difference from romantic, redemptive historical thought lies in the total inaccessibility of the past that is implied by a linear-chronological historiography; the past can only retain its utopian content within a linear-chronological model of history if we have the technology to revisit and change it. This, I argue in Chapter 5, is where science fiction enters the picture and begins its subsumption of alternate history into a framework of mechanical apparatus and movement along linear temporalities.

This study will situate alternate history in the period of the nineteenth century when History was a discipline that was able to interrogate other fields of knowledge by historicising

77 Buckle specifically acknowledges a debt to Comte in the introduction to History and Civilization in England (Buckle, History of Civilisation in England, 1:5).
them in different ways: by adopting different models of historiography that were later than romantic historiography but not ‘post’-romantic in that they sought to reconcile a redemptive model of history with the formation of other disciplinary spheres. This claim stands in the midst of differently accented accounts of the development of History as a discipline in the nineteenth century; between, for example, White’s assertion of a golden age of historiography when it was able to mediate between the disciplines, and Heyck’s account of an inevitable specialisation in the arts and sciences over the course of the nineteenth century, leading to the academic professionalism of History and other disciplines. Gilmour periodises the Victorian era into two phases: reform (to 1850), and stability (from the Great Exhibition onwards)—an account which echoes White’s division of the century but explains the decline of the morally-instructive historian differently, as the result of a climate where reform had become radicalised and a more complacent general audience were less receptive to the ethical calls of the past. And yet each of these accounts relies on a common master-narrative: technological development and increasing complexity in the disciplines of knowledge. If we consider contemporary advances in science, it is not at all clear that they presented a threat to literary historiography at the time: the archaeological discoveries of fallen civilizations, for example, would have reinforced metahistorical ideas of historical progress as cyclical and undermined any claims in the inexorably progressive movement of history. Texts such as L’éternité par les astres stand as critiques of that idea of ongoing historical progress. Alternate history, through its defining characteristic of arranging the past for the purposes of present reflection, provides a temporal structure that, for a period at least, resists the linearity of progressive time and also the sense of history as the unidirectional accumulation of events.

Thus, the difficulty in identifying a historiographical position for alternate history in the nineteenth century is twofold: the process of the transformation of history-writing in the period is difficult to define along a single or combination of axes (professionalisation, the rise of empiricism, etc.); also, the alternate-historical format contains a structure that is resistant to the meta-narrative of the Victorian age: technological and social progress, and increasing demarcation between knowledge disciplines. Examination of the historians discussed above tends to place them in the midst of these narratives of change, rather than in terms of either of the end-points. Carignan refers to the same indeterminacy when he describes the historical content of George Eliot’s novels “as something that addressed a kind of historiographical gap.” He quotes a phrase from Eliot’s essay “Historic Imagination”: “the decay and final

79 White, “The Burden of History.”
81 Gilmour, The Victorian Period.
struggle of old systems,” which describes the historiographical phase which is also the place of alternate history, a period of diminishing belief in the past’s commensurability with the present. Alternate-historical texts ought to be located not as waypoints on a journey of cultural development, but in an indeterminate stage of transformation, just as the structure of alternate history itself invites a view of history in which the present is not bound to the recorded past, nor the future to the present.

**Critical Histories of and in the Nineteenth Century**

So far I have been making a number of assumptions which now require examination. The first is that alternate history, a disparate and slim category of often minor texts, can somehow stand as the privileged category for illuminating and substantiating patterns of historical thought in the nineteenth century. Another is that such patterns exist and permeate the culture of high literature as they do the fields of science and political pamphlets, which brings this discussion into the midst of territorial disputes between cultural and literary studies—disputes which seem especially prevalent among scholars of the Victorian period. The 1999 special issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture* devoted to the theme of “Victorian Studies and Cultural Studies” focuses the areas of conflict. Bruce Robbins launches a direct attack on cultural criticism, accusing it of being more implicated in market forces than it chooses to admit. This stance is balanced by Linda Shires’ article, in which she claims that Victorian literary studies, to its harm, “is haunted by an over-reliance on the middle-class form which made it famous, the realist novel.” Carolyn Williams conciliates by acknowledging the limitations of genre analysis (its insistence on formal continuities), and cultural analysis’s wider perspective upon “discursive formations” (its over-emphasis on hegemonic structures); both, however, are able to instruct in the areas beyond the normal reach of the other. Her maxim is that “too great a conceptual emphasis on continuity produces a vulgar taxonomism, as too great a conceptual emphasis on discontinuity produces a vulgar thematics of (content and) containment.” It is unsurprising that Michel Foucault appears as the emblematic figure of a cultural studies tradition that cuts across discursive formations, given the preoccupation in his work with the interpenetration of social formations and power in the long nineteenth

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86 Carolyn Williams, “‘Genre’ and ‘Discourse’ in Victorian Cultural Studies,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 2 (1999): 520 (original emphasis).
century.\textsuperscript{87} Williams objects to his “overemphasis on hegemony, policing and containment,” and Isobel Armstrong picks out, rightly, the panopticon as an overused figure, and complains more generally that Foucauldian frameworks “ignore groups, subgroups, and the subtleties of nineteenth-century formations.”\textsuperscript{88} These criticisms are better described as against the application of Foucault to nineteenth-century studies, rather than against Foucault exclusively; against the penetration of Victorian literary studies by a cultural studies tradition that cites Foucault to support its analysis of the ways that life and bodies are produced and contained within structures of power; against the influence of Foucault’s histories of institutional forms such as the clinic and prison which a critical tradition then discovers in literary texts as well as everywhere else.

In making the claim that patterns of historical thought appear, variously inflected, in different fields of knowledge, I am drawing upon a different aspect of Foucault’s thought: not his identification of hegemonic structures distributed at the level of biopolitics, but rather his assertion that the nineteenth century was one whose “great obsession” was history. This is not only to establish a conceptual context for a thesis whose subject is nineteenth-century historiography, but also to indicate what I consider to be the problems, in Foucault’s own terms, in making this claim. He appears obliged to refer to models of depth and surface that he rejects elsewhere, a problem that allows us to focus on emergence as a historical puzzle with a particular significance in the nineteenth century. I will then present Walter Benjamin’s idea of literary history as a method of coordinating literature’s “truth-content” with its historical reception (literature as “an organon of history”\textsuperscript{89}) in order to reassert Foucault’s sense of the nineteenth century as obsessed with history and to apply this in a way that applies “critical history” to literary history in a way that is sensitive to the analysis of the formal qualities of literary works.

The rather broad hypothesis that is presented late in the final part of The Order of Things is that historical perception, prior to the nineteenth century, did not differentiate between the chronology of nature, systems and human life; that there was

\begin{itemize}
  \item a vast historical stream, uniform in each of its points, drawing with it in one and
  \item the same current, in one and the same fall or ascension, or cycle, all men, and
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{87} The nomination of Foucault as the figure responsible for these excesses may be misplaced, as Jonathan Loesberg suggests. Rather, it is the interpretive systems of his successors, Hayden White, Stephen Greenblatt and Jacques Derrida whose influence has shackled literary studies with these all-encompassing frameworks (Jonathan Loesberg, “Cultural Studies, Victorian Studies, and Formalism,” \textit{Victorian Literature and Culture} 27, no. 2 (1999): 537–544).


\textsuperscript{89} Benjamin, “Literary History and the Study of Literature,” 464.
with them things and animals, every living or inert being, even the most unmoved aspects of the earth.  

This unity was fragmented in the early nineteenth century, when different areas of knowledge were seen to have their own temporalities, or historicities. As a result, men and women are unable to find a manner of being in history that accords with their species-being; instead, man “finds himself interwoven in his own being with histories that are neither subordinate to him nor homogeneous with him.” Foucault’s claim is one that periodises an understanding of history, as well as the type of reflexivity that accompanies the awareness. There is a mania for History, a desire “to historicize everything, to write a general history of everything, to go back ceaselessly through time”, also a recognition that one’s own relationship to this newly discovered catalogue of historicities has to be fashioned rather than discovered. For Foucault, just as humans are cast out from the differentiated chronologies of the natural world (of gnats and glaciers), they discover a new one, of their own making: the history of revolutions and social advance; and so what we see is a self-consciousness of historical knowledge, by which humans are able to observe and be aware of their own powers of self-fashioning. This can help us make sense of the hesitation or perpetual deferment regarding ideas that Foucault also attributes to nineteenth-century intellectual culture, one which “always has something still to think at the very moment when it thinks, that always has time to think again what it has thought.” Historical interpretation is never complete, and the past can always be revisited differently with each passing moment. This accessibility of the past to revision and reconsideration is a condition for the possibility of alternate-historical thought, and Foucault’s attribution of this quality to nineteenth-century thought is a position I am adopting in my claim that alternate history emerged during this period.

This point of man’s consciousness of his own thought seems to owe a debt to Marx, who writes in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 that “conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being. [...] [H]is own life is an object for him.” Where Foucault differs from Marx is in his periodisation of this reflexive character of thought, and in attaching this quality to the

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91 Foucault, The Order of Things, 402.
92 Foucault, The Order of Things, 403.
93 Foucault is not alone in this hypothesis of the transformation from a universal chronology to differentiated ones; Reinhart Kosellek makes a similar argument about the movement toward the modern conception of historical concepts, for example Revolution (Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)).
94 Foucault, The Order of Things, 406.
nineteenth century, Foucault’s claim reverts to categories that he rejects elsewhere, as is clear in this passage:

The imaginative values then assumed by the past, the whole lyrical halo that surrounded the consciousness of history at that period, the lively curiosity shown for documents or for traces left behind by time—all this is a *surface expression* of the simple fact that man found himself emptied of history. 96

Explicit in the word “surface” is a reliance on the division between what is latent and what is manifest that Foucault would reject so decisively and influentially in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* and elsewhere. It also undermines the assertion that this breach cannot be explained, only examined according to an “archaeological method” that resolutely avoids terms such as “latent” and rejects any such depth model in their excavation of thought upon its ground of origin. 97 In other words, the intrusion of the concept of “surface” implies an explanatory apparatus that Foucault has determined to avoid.

Foucault can be said to need the nineteenth century in order for his own position on history, technology and the formation of the subject to appear; the embeddedness of his work within nineteenth-century cultural contexts collapses the distance between his inferences and the period under investigation. If, in Marx, we find an exemplar of the human historicity which Foucault attributes to the nineteenth century, do we not find Marx slipping forward into the twentieth century and being subsumed into a Foucauldian analysis of the nineteenth? 98

Equally, we could say that Foucault is drawn back into the nineteenth century, into the alleged origin of reflexive historical thought that allows humans to observe and fashion their own historicity—thus making the search for the “conditions of possibility” of this epistemic change a defining concern for both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 99 This casts doubt on the basis upon which positive claims can be made at all about the period and materials in question: for what is being investigated? Is nineteenth-century alternate history (which, as has already been pointed out, is only discernible because of its coalescence as a popular form in the twentieth century) a real subject at all, or is its investigation no more than a process of digging among literary eccentricities for texts which appear as the precursors to a later genre? A related anxiety is that this and other literary histories may be no more than the elicitation of the texts’ critical content, which is then translated into a modern theoretical terminology and spoken back to them as an interpretation which they already contain within themselves. This is especially clear when we read his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” and perceive how his

96 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 402 (emphasis added).
97 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 236.
98 We recall that it was the discovery of the *Economic and Philosophical Fragments* in the 1930s that enabled the formation of the Frankfurt school through the recuperation of Marxist theory.
99 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxiv.
claims about origin and emergence are delivered as an assemblage and ventriloquisation of Nietzsche—in fact in a manner of presentation comparable to Benjamin’s adoption of quotation as method.

Here, Foucault rejects the search for the originary moment of a tradition of historical interpretation, one that presumes an “apocalyptic objectivity” for the historian, and proposes “a history whose perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time.” Marx also rejected the assertion of origins when he wrote: “Do not let us go back to a fictitious primordial condition as the political economist does, when he tries to explain. [...] Theology in the same way explains the origin of evil by the fall of man: that is, it assumes as a fact, in historical form, what has to be explained.” For both Foucault and Marx, a different order of the origin is sought, which in Foucault becomes the basis of the archaeological method: to describe the conditions of possibility that ground epistemic change rather than the event of its origination—which is an empty category, “a ‘non-place’, a pure distance.” The terms that Foucault takes from Nietzsche require examination, not only for clarification but also because they refer to the fundamental concepts of origination and emergence that are the subject of his essay, and which frame my discussion of alternate history. While “Ursprung” is used to refer to “origin” in general, the words “Herkunft” and “Entstehung” have more specific applications; the former refers to “stock” or “descent” and contains the “numberless beginnings” which make up the processes of genealogy and remain open to “the exteriority of accidents.” Entstehung rather “designates emergence, the moment of arising” and it is this that refers to the “eruption” that takes place in a relationship of forces. It is this sense of origination that Foucault refers to as “a ‘non-place’, a pure distance, which indicates that the adversaries do not belong to a common space.” Origination is a similarly problematic concept in alternate history, for although a moment of divergence may be clearly marked (when Geoffroy-Château’s Napoleon does not wait outside Moscow), and be seen as the historical moment when the alternate-historical originates, this origination is a confrontation of incommensurate forces: between the record of the past and the historical desires affecting the author in the present.

The terminology of origination is problematic for my discussion of alternate history which, as explained in the Introduction, seeks to differentiate between the categories of origin

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101 Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, 69.
102 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 150.
103 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 145, 146.
104 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 149.
105 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 150.
and emergence. Foucault’s interest, as already stated, is to oppose the assertion of historical origins understood as a fact available to the historian; instead, to pose a genealogical model without beginning which is “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary.” Such a model is alert to the “heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” and makes possible a critical historical knowledge that resists the imposition of linear narratives of necessary development. It is also a transposition to the field of History of his archaeological method of discovering the conditions of possibility that underlie epistemic changes. Those archaeological claims (as I have suggested) are susceptible to criticism, but the objection I raised—that Foucault depends on a distinction between latent and manifest—can be addressed by thinking about emergence in terms of genealogical descent (or Herkunft). To frame this archaeologically before turning to literary history, we can consider an account of the method provided by Walter Benjamin, and his idea of excavation, which privileges the situation of the investigator above that of his or her source material; he writes that

Genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through.

This passage responds (in advance) to the way in which Foucault seems to realise his own critical position through excavating the thought of the nineteenth century, and to outline a model of literary criticism which can explain the appearance of precursors to literary genres that we recognise afterwards. Benjamin’s description of the “good archaeological report” suggests that the knowledge acquired is as much self-knowledge as knowledge of the materials one discovers, but those materials are able to illuminate the situation of the archaeologist in new ways, with each discovery.

Samuel Weber has noticed an interesting path that leads from Foucault to Benjamin. Habermas, in a critique of Foucault’s “transcendental historicism,” draws upon the figures of a flash of light, the kaleidoscope, and frozen history to describe the way Foucault’s presentation of the episteme moves outside of its own stated methodological limits. Weber observes: “What is striking […] is the extent to which Habermas’ characterization of Foucault’s ‘transcendental historicist’ [sic] gravitates, in its metaphors, toward the language of Walter Benjamin.” Weber’s article is about Benjamin, not Foucault, but the connection reminds us

106 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 139.
107 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 147.
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how few critics have dwelt on the relationship between Foucault’s and Benjamin’s historiographical positions, given their attempts in common to relate the question of thought in history to the category of origin. By placing far more emphasis on the reception of the work and thought of historical periods by later readers or critics, Benjamin implies a methodology that may be able to negotiate the plea by literary studies for maintaining a formalism of analysis and a distinction between the communicative powers of the literary text over other forms of textual practice—for these can be understood as a work’s particular manner of historical descent.

Like Foucault, Benjamin rejects an interpretation of events that relies upon causal necessity: he writes in his essay on “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” that “we cannot conceive of a single empirical event that bears a necessary relation to the time of its occurrence.” In another early essay, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” Benjamin removes the meaning of artworks from their embeddedness in historical contexts, and transfers this function to the historical journey by which they arrive at their reception by the critic: “The history of works prepares for their critique, and thus historical distance increases their power.” Here we see the vital importance that Benjamin attributes to the work’s afterlife (/afterlives) and the recuperative role of the critic in measuring the truth-content of the work as it emerges with the passage of time; the most striking figuration of this is the description of the critic as an alchemist and the artwork as a funeral pyre, “whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced.” Beatrice Hanssen usefully illustrates this sense of the work’s afterlife by referencing the translation essay, in which Benjamin presents the work’s translatability as analogous to the temporal kernel located in the work itself. Hanssen writes: “While the translation unfolds, unfurls, perpetually renews and transforms the original, it at once springs forth from it, finding its condition of possibility in the original’s afterlife.”

For Hanssen, this defines the particular form of history that pertains to works of art, which is to be considered, paradoxically, as their “natural history.” Translated into Foucauldian terminology, this is the distinctive “historicity” of artworks. Benjamin’s clearest statement of this function is a reiteration of his comments on excavation in the context of

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literary history: “What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them—our age—in the age during which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organon of history; and to achieve this, and not to reduce literature to the material of history, is the task of the literary historian.”

“Organon” seems to be used in its meaning as an instrument of thought or knowledge; literature, then, is an instrument that allows us to perceive history in the sense that Weber emphasises, in flashes of recognition that the present achieves through a moment of orientation toward and affinity with the past. This perception is momentary, sudden, and stands apart from an understanding of history as a series of accumulating events, each determined by its predecessors and determining that which follows.

This conception of history is at the heart of Benjamin’s redemptive historiography, as well as his literary history. Weber cites an important passage from the Prologue to the work on Tragic Drama, which contains Benjamin’s declaration that “origin stands in the flow of becoming as a maelstrom which irresistibly tears the stuff of emergence into its rhythm.”

This, I understand as a statement on how historical time needs to be “torn” or peeled away from an association with chronological time; origin, therefore, becomes a historical concept but one disassociated from dates, chronologies and causal history. Earlier in the same passage, Benjamin has written that “origin, although a historical category through and through, has nevertheless nothing in common with emergence (Enstehen).” This view implies a decisive difference from Foucault, for whom (following Nietzsche) the historiographical concept of origin (Ursprung) needs to be divided into the more assiduously considered process of descent (Herkunft) and emergence (Enstehen). Weber defines origin thus: “It is not the Werden or becoming of something that has already emerged or ‘sprung forth’ (Entsprungenen). Rather, it is the offspring (Entspringendes) of coming-to-be and going-away, Werden und Bergehen.”

This reflects the sense in which origin only comes to light much later than the process of origination, and is thus a function of historical interpretation, but his formulation of the way the artwork is transmitted in history can and should be questioned. Weber explains that “an originary phenomenon may be defined as the form in which an idea [...] sets itself apart and against [...] the historical world, until it has exhausted its combinatorial possibilities.” What is overlooked here is the function of the critic as the figure who is able to reveal the fulfilment

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117 Weber, “Genealogy of Modernity,” 468. Osborne’s translation, “nothing in common with genesis” (45) has been changed to “nothing in common with emergence.”
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of the idea, for whom historical time or distance is both a precondition for revelation, and also that which is collapsed and traversed through the act of revelation. Let us consider a key passage, to which Weber is clearly referring:

That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and re-establishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history. Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development.120

The puzzle of this extract is presented through its structure: the first statement mirrors the last, but within the section the reader has to balance the sense of the original phenomenon (or artwork) as “imperfect and incomplete” but also “revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history.” We can only solve this paradox through an understanding of the role of the critic, as laid out in the Goethe essay, as the figure who can discern the idea from its form (or “material content”121). This can only be achieved when (and not “until”—the word Weber chooses) the idea has confronted history in sufficient number of iterations and forms for the critic to be able to discern the idea; which is not to say that the origin and idea can be liberated from their immediate material content. The idea is not detached from the field of content and concepts; it has gathered them into a pattern of intelligibility, and thus does not subsume their material content of formal specificities. Ideas, their expression and the history and apparatus of their interpretation stand in an arrangement that is mutually dependent. To use Benjamin’s own figuration: “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.”122

To apply these thoughts to the task of identifying the examples of alternate history that pre-date its formation as a distinctive and recognisable form, we must understand that the emergence of a genre is accomplished through a sufficient number of iterations (“the totality of its history”). The idea of alternate history becomes perceptible to the critic as a completed process whose genealogy can be posited as those participating components of alternate history, including its various patterns (romantic-utopian etc.) which we can detach from the milky way of literary texts in the nineteenth century and to which we can assign the function of belonging to and delineating alternate history’s constellation.

120 Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 45–46.
121 Benjamin, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” 298.
122 Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 35.
We can now clarify the difference in the ways that Foucault and Benjamin articulate origin, descent and emergence by concentrating on the latter term. Emergence in Foucault, as I have already shown, is treated as a non-place that is defined by the conflict between adversaries—which in the context of his essay on Nietzsche, refers to conflicts between rival interpretations of history. Benjamin also denies emergence as a historical event. But we can re-insert emergence into Benjamin’s sense of origin, even though he has written that origin has “nothing in common with emergence.” Benjamin also wants to reappropriate the category of Ursprung from any association with event, but does so by fusing emergence and descent into a transformed meaning of origin: the artwork, through the way its truth content is revealed via historical distance from the critic, unfolds its origin-idea as a constellation which emerges in the very process of descent. Given the function of the critic as the figure in whom the origin or idea is revealed and completed, it is not surprising that such a critical methodology is drawn to works in which this form of criticism can discover itself. A historiography whose figure is the dialectical image discovers itself in the advent of photography; Benjamin’s form of historical archaeology or excavation finds its foundation in Baroque drama. A difference is that this mutual recognition of criticism and the artwork is not elided (as is sometimes the case with Foucault), but placed at the centre of Benjamin’s critical project.

Benjamin’s historicisation of criticism constitutes a method which renders history as a domain that is best apprehended through the examination of aesthetic objects. The field of works of art and literature is considered as the mediating instrument (or “organon”) for understanding historical difference, which goes some way to collapsing the distinction between the formal attributes of literature (which are no longer independent and transhistorical) and the cultural formations which, for Benjamin, are historical regimes of perception that are likewise best apprehended as aesthetic categories identifiable through historical separation from the critic. Such a literary historiography is particularly receptive to the idea of alternate history, being opposed to the positivist historical methods of the late nineteenth century; in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” he explicitly opposes Ranke’s claim to know the past “the way it really was,” instead claiming that the articulation of the past “means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” Benjamin’s return to nineteenth-century historical thought is important, as is his rejection of historical ‘facts’ which are, the historian declares, insulated from reconsideration and revision—a vain

123 Benjamin writes: “The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the Trauerspiel, is present in reality in the form of the ruin.” (Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 177).
declaration. History remains open to recovery and rearrangement through its condition of its being always an “articulation,” and thus accessible differently from each present moment, each of which can perceive “a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked.” One of the qualities that I will be attaching to several of the alternate histories in the nineteenth century is participation in this critical examination of the past, not for the purposes of entertainment but as a confrontation of the apparently immutably defined past (“the way it really was”), and a challenge to readers to reconsider the present through an articulation with the past, here transformed into fiction. This criticality of alternate history can also be articulated with Foucault’s project of critical history, as expressed in the Introduction to Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality, where he describes the project of unthinking one’s assumptions, here historical ones: “The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.” Alternate history (not always but in several of the iterations I will be examining) engages in the same critical project but from the other end; it begins with the alteration of history in order to facilitate the reconsideration of assumptions.

Finally, how can we move from an examination of alternate history to wider claims about nineteenth-century historical culture, given its literary minority—its non-awareness of itself as a category, its works of questionable aesthetic value, its dispersal among genres and nationalities? Perhaps such a minor literature can have a disproportionate exemplary value, especially given its defining characteristic of being that which is excluded from received history. The relation at stake is of the part to the whole, and of the work that is taken as an example of wider cultural patterns. Giorgio Agamben has observed the paradoxical status of the example which, by being removed from its context to take on this role, becomes both the exception as well as the example. The Latin “exemplum” derives from “eximĕre,” “to take out,” which it shares with the word “exempt”; “exception” derives from “excipĕre,” also meaning “to take out” (OED). Agamben dwelling on precisely this divergence of meaning from a shared etymology, which he illustrates with the case of the grammatical example that takes on a different function from the sentence usage of the word or phrase by operating in the role of example. He writes that “in fact, the example is excluded from the rule not because it does not belong to the normal case, but, on the contrary, because it exhibits its belonging to it.” This can be said to apply to a study of alternate history in two ways: first, it consists of material

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which is historically exceptional (that which does not belong to history) in order to illustrate truths or make claims about that which is included in the passage of history. Second, its particular time conceit always excludes it from the genres to which it has a relation: the historical novel, the historical account, or the description of a utopia to come. It then, counterintuitively, can take on the role of a “paradigm” in Agamben’s sense: “The paradigm is a singular case that is isolated from its context only insofar as, by exhibiting its own singularity, it makes intelligible a new ensemble, whose homogeneity it itself constitutes.” The selection of the part with a modifying effect upon the perception of the whole is a characteristic that George Steiner is attentive to in his introduction to Benjamin’s The Origin of Tragic Drama:

It is not only that Benjamin is trapped in the hermeneutic cycle—the use of the part to define the whole whose own definition governs the status of the part—but, like Heidegger, he welcomes this circularity, perceiving in it the characteristic intimacy which binds object to interpretation and interpretation to object in the humanities.

The function of the paradigm identified by Agamben accords with the model of literary criticism which I have taken from Benjamin, that of an object whose weight of meaning lies in its articulation with the present moment, and by which aesthetic objects and the intervening period between their production and reception stand in a new relation. To pursue the unrecognised category of alternate history in the nineteenth century—one without a canon but whose texts must be nominated and argued for in order to validate, for the first time, the canon itself—is a critical task that must acknowledge its own wilful and arbitrary nature. In doing so it seeks to discover new patterns of historiographical thought in the nineteenth century which, for example, can cause the utopian and science-fiction works of the fin de siècle to be interpreted in modified ways, as part of a “new ensemble.”

Alternate History and Science Fiction

In this final section of the chapter, I look at how the category of alternate history is able to trouble Darko Suvin’s provocative and persistent definition of utopian fiction as “not a genre but the socio-political subgenre of science fiction.” I draw on a recent critique of this definition of science fiction by China Miéville, and show how the various historical modes of alternate history illuminate the category distinctions that arise in the late nineteenth century

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130 Suvin, Metamorphoses of science fiction, 61.
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and have preoccupied literary critics from the latter part of the twentieth century onward. These category distinctions, tellingly, involve the choice of terms used to describe alternate histories. I am jumping ahead to the latter texts under investigation in this thesis, particularly H. G. Wells’s novella *The Time Machine* (1895), which will be examined in more detail in Chapter 5. To consider alternate history’s significance to fin-de-siècle science fiction here will clarify the overall direction of the study, and its identification of the increasing association of the category of alternate history with a linear-chronological model in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The antagonism of science fiction criticism to its supposedly poor cousin, fantasy, is well-attested and the subject of recent critical re-evaluation. The tradition of scholarly disdain toward fantasy is encapsulated in an editorial note that appears above Raymond Williams’s early articulation of utopian and science fiction: “*Science-Fiction Studies* publishes articles on science fiction, including utopia fiction, but not, except for purposes of comparison or contrast, supernatural or mythological fantasy.” Contestations over category distinctions surrounding SF have not been settled nor have they gone away, in large part due to Darko Suvin’s provocative absorption of an older literary form, utopian fiction, into a newer one—science fiction. These territorial disputes have a history and an extent which it would be beyond the scope of this section to reproduce, and I am aware that inserting another category—alternate history—into this critical field with such limited space may seem bound to both overcomplicate and simplify the debate. Nevertheless, I claim that the three modes I have identified in alternate history can productively illuminate the vexed distinctions between science and utopian fiction, and I draw upon these modes in order to support a critique of the ideological attachment to socio-technological progress that is present in Wells. This critical apparatus allows us to understand the rise of Wells’s fiction as the late-century conquest of historical alternatives by a linear-chronological understanding of historical development—a conquest which shaped the critical foundations by which these categories became so divergent and opposed.

Raymond Williams reminds us that the distinction between utopian and science fiction arises from Engels’ affirmation of scientific over utopian socialism, with Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* and Thomas More’s *Utopia* as the early exemplars of these two traditions. It is precisely the distinction that Wells himself makes at the beginning of *A Modern Utopia* (1905),

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134 Williams, “Utopia and Science Fiction,” 205.
when he contrasts his utopia with Morris’s. Darko Suvin appears to be valorising an equivalent scientific project for literature when he describes science fiction as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.” This, we infer, differentiates it from utopian fiction which, though also a literature of “estrangement,” is opposed to the naturalistic literature that reflects bourgeois individualism and naturalises the status quo. These characterisations clarify the statement that “strictly and precisely speaking, utopia is not a genre but the sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction.” This retrospective absorption is acknowledged: “Paradoxically, it can be seen as such only now that SF has expanded into its modern phase, ‘looking backward’ from its englobing of utopia.” From these quotations, we see that utopian fiction changes into (and perhaps, for Suvin, come of age as) a “socio-political” mode of world-creation—which Engels described as “scientific.” To claim that ‘realism’ (a label whose use by Suvin will be explained) is at the heart of Suvin’s definition of SF may seem a reduction of his position and will require some explanation.

China Miéville has drawn attention to the slipperiness of Suvin’s term “cognition.” He takes “cognitive estrangement” to mean, as I do, the “alienation from the everyday effected by the non-realist setting” which is “‘cognitively’ organised”; in other words, it is a concept that refers to a problematic sense of realism understood as psychological plausibility. We are confronted, however, with the non-correspondence of the features of Wells’s stories with physical laws, for example the ability to achieve invisibility—and we should recall Wells’s retrospective judgement upon his early romances that “they are all fantasies; they do not aim to project a serious possibility.” To defend Suvin’s definition thus requires the type of qualification that Carl Freedman proposes, which re-terms “cognition” as “cognition effect”; but, as Miéville points out, if this modified term is used to describe texts which are scientifically spurious, it refers to something entirely different from cognitive logic, from which it cannot be derived. From this, Miéville argues that the idea of a “cognition effect” as the basis for a category contains dangerous implications, for it “surrenders the terrain of supposed

136 Suvin, Metamorphoses of science fiction, 7–8.
137 Suvin, Metamorphoses of science fiction, 53.
138 Suvin, Metamorphoses of science fiction, 61.
139 Miéville, “Afterword: Cognition as Ideology,” 246n.
conceptual logic and rigour to the whims and diktats of a cadre of ‘expert’ author-functions."\(^{143}\)

We thus realise that Suvin’s avoidance of science, in the sense of technological futurism, for defining the genre of SF, entails an implicit appeal to science-as-value elsewhere—as the clear-sighted and rational manner of presenting alternative societies, generally in the future. This “effect” of clear-sightedness is reinforced within the texts by the narrator’s apparently empirical judgements which are arrived at through observation and conclusion, in the way that Prendick (in The Island of Doctor Moreau) and the time traveller (in The Time Machine) come to interpret the strange environments using rational thought, as I discuss in Chapter 5. This helps to explain the vociferous dismissal of fantasy literature with its apparatus of folklore and magic, and perhaps Suvin’s classification of News from Nowhere outside of the realms of SF and utopian fiction (“the finest specimen of Earthly Paradise story in modern literature”\(^{144}\)). The historically indeterminate setting of News from Nowhere (despite being given a specific date in the future) immediately places it outside of one that is “cognitive” or has a “cognitive effect.” It also leaves the definition of SF vulnerable, for it seems to appeal only to texts with a factitious respectability. Despite Suvin’s affiliation to Marxist literary criticism, his claims for the ability of SF to interrogate the politics of the present, and his co-option of thinkers such as Ernst Bloch (whose concept of the “novum” he draws upon), Suvin’s framing of SF appears to reproduce the ideology of technological modernity; or what Miéville calls “capitalist science’s bullshit about itself.”\(^{145}\)

Alternate history (with its cognate category counterfactual history) occupies a central position in the debate concerning the “realism” of science and utopian fiction. Hayden White has recently confronted this question of realism in an essay which he begins by quoting Lewis Mumford’s claim that “history is the sternest critic of utopia.”\(^{146}\) White opposes the view “which sets utopia over against history as fantasy against fact, [...] as myth against reason”; one by which “any utopian project seeking to liberate us from this reality will be adjudged to be ‘unrealistic’.”\(^{147}\) The identification of utopia with fantasy surely reflects the same criteria of psychological plausibility, associated with Suvin, by which science fiction is valued in terms of its difference from magical and fantasy literature. White’s account of the relationship between history and utopia that has (he claims) been in place from the nineteenth-century onwards is illuminating (in which “history” is understood as an archive of data replete with evidence that humans can live in harmonious communities):

\(^{143}\) Miéville, “Afterword: Cognition as Ideology,” 239.
\(^{144}\) Suvin, Metamorphoses of science fiction, 182.
\(^{147}\) White, “Utopian and Historical Thinking,” 12, 18.
Since the early nineteenth century, utopia has been conceived as the antithesis of history: where there is history, there is no utopia; where there is utopia, there is no history.\(^{148}\)

This periodisation reflects modern criticisms of the dangerous idealism of utopian thought (as identified by Levitas and Beaumont\(^{149}\)), and also Francis Fukuyama’s declaration that the fall of the Berlin wall had initiated the hegemony of perpetual capitalism—the infamous “end of history” which, in a neo-conservative world-view, is a utopian pronouncement. The opposition to the study of History is, as will be discussed, both a characteristic of William Morris’s Nowhere, and a problem of representation of which Morris is singularly conscious. Alternate history—at least in its romantic-utopian and critical-reflexive modes—can be said to provide an always-provisional bridge across this ideological division of history and utopia, for it describes a progression of events that is “historical” (it presents an account of the past) but which is at the same time “utopian” in that it is knowingly and explicitly outside of history as the recorded events which led up to and produced the present. It is always temporary and provisional because its “historical” character is fictitious—thus it occupies or engages the reader for the amount of time she or he is able to suspend herself from the immersiveness of the present, and a historiography which declares each individual as captive to the events of the past.

This spanning of the two opposed categories is only possible when the historical alteration occurs in the past, as a departure from “real history.” I will consider, for example, how Geoffroy-Château’s *Napoléon Apocryphe*, by plotting a sequence of events that never happened, is able to reflect upon the tendency to project utopian desires into the field of history; or how Disraeli’s *Alroy* is able make political claims for the present by inserting fictitious and unrealised modes of government into past history; or how Blanqui in *L’éternité par les astres* multiplies historical alternatives across the universe, *ad nauseam*, in order to forestall any exercise in thinking of utopia as what might have historically occurred if we were simply born on a luckier planet. In all of these examples, more or less reflexively and in order to arrive at diverse positions, utopia becomes inextricably linked to the apprehension of history. And it is by foreclosing or delimiting that utopia within an inaccessible history that alternate history makes itself distinct from the future histories with which Suvin conflates

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\(^{148}\) White, “Utopian and Historical Thinking,” 15.

them.\textsuperscript{150} As soon as “alternative histories” are cast into a future time, they become ‘possible’, and hence subject to judgements regarding how realisable (or cognitively plausible) they are.

Fredric Jameson reads the emergence of science fiction during the nineteenth century in a way which describes the relationship between contraries, in a space which can also be described as the terrain of alternate history. He suggests that a cultural logic links the decline of the historical novel in the mid-century to the rise of science fiction in the latter half, referring to “the emergence of the new genre of SF as a form which now registers some nascent sense of the future, and does so in the space on which a sense of the past had once been inscribed.”\textsuperscript{151} The redundancy of the historical novel, and the emergence of its successor, is linked to “a mutation in our relationship to historical time itself,” one in which the present became unrepresentable as the culmination of the past; “SF thus enacts and enables a structurally unique ‘method’ for apprehending the present as history.”\textsuperscript{152} This chimes with Matthew Beaumont’s interpretation of the capacity of utopian and futuristic fiction to serve as a lens or perspective by which the obscurity of the present can be penetrated; also his articulation of the historicity of \textit{News from Nowhere} with the standardisation of time at the \textit{fin de siècle} of which the International Meridian Conference of 1884 was exemplary.\textsuperscript{153} Jameson’s differentiation makes it possible to look for a category that stands outside his polarisation of the historical and SF forms, one which can transfer SF’s “fantasies about the future” backward in time, and which can present a past historical setting that is not compelled, as Jameson says of the historical novel, toward self-containment: “In order for narrative to project some sense of a totality of experience in space and time, it must surely know some closure.”\textsuperscript{154} The alternate histories that will be examined in this thesis, and which span the length of the nineteenth century, do not end with such a sense of closure (by being already foreclosed), through their effect of encouraging a reading of the present as pregnant with unhistorical possibilities from the imagined past (\textit{Alroy}, \textit{Uchronie}, \textit{After London}).

So, alternate history is problematic for the subsumption of utopian literature into science fiction, for the way that its format of world-creation is set in past history (rearranged), and thus does not need to be grounded within any “cognitive effect.” This ability of alternate

\textsuperscript{150} Suvin, “The Rise of the Alternative History Sub-Genre,” 148. Suvin describes three types of narrative, “the Extraordinary Voyage, the Future War, and the Alternative History” all as “clusters or sub-genres of SF”.
\textsuperscript{151} Fredric Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future?,” \textit{Science Fiction Studies} 9, no. 2 (July 1982): 150.
\textsuperscript{152} Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia,” 149, 153.
\textsuperscript{154} Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia,” 148.
history to present past-historical fantasies to the reader, whether in a romantic-utopian or critical-reflexive mode, resonates with theoretical observations of the way that the utopian “wish image” can produce utopian images from the past, and can help us understood the under-examined tendency of the utopian imagination to animate the past in new and instructive ways—ways which approximate to the romantic historiography of Carlyle and others, and which we also find in Disraeli’s fictional excavations in Alroy.

To be confronted with a rearranged version of the past also describes the literary-historical task of tracing the emergence of alternate history, for this study assembles a canon of texts that manifest explicitly or implicitly the incipient traces of a later genre into which it then resists assimilation—in terms of intellectual context and motivating desires for establishing relations with the past. Such a disruption of smooth genealogies, in literature and history, is the central quality of alternate history, and the intervention effected by its alterations. This chapter has established the primary critical interpretations of alternate history in the twentieth century in order to show their limited ability to describe the motivations and historiographical experimentation of earlier expressions of the time-conceit that defines alternate history. Faced with the inadequacies of a genealogical literary history of the category, we should situate nineteenth-century alternate histories within a context of intellectual history: that of the differentiation and establishment of separate knowledge disciplines, and in particular the transformation of historical knowledge from the romantic model of historical interpretation, which was entangled with the study of literature from the past, to one that was described as scientific and objective. I have outlined conceptual questions which relate to this intellectual context, notably those which arise in Foucault’s identification of History as the master epistemological framework for the formation of knowledge disciplines in the nineteenth century, with attendant issues regarding the special significance of processes of emergence and origination during the period. The relationship of utopian literature and the historical novel with science fiction for literary theorists is a local literary-historical instance of the claims and disagreements to which my study of nineteenth-century alternate history and its contexts respond; by showing how the historiographical models of earlier alternate histories of the period eventually gave way to a linear-chronological one, so influentially incorporated into The Time Machine, it is possible to challenge Suvin’s “englobing” of utopian literature by science fiction, and to interpret the rise of science fiction at the end of the century as historiographically divided from the alternate histories of which it has been presented as the culmination. The study of alternate history in the nineteenth century leads to a recognition of the disjuncture between its iterations in that century, and its twentieth-century afterlives.
Chapter 2
Napoleonic Alternatives

I have never met Napoleon, but I plan to find the time.
—Steely Dan, “Pretzel Logic”

Introduction
Alternate histories cluster around the figure of Napoleon in the nineteenth century, just as they would be so often attached to Hitler in the following century. This chapter examines, and proposes contexts for, the first full-length and unequivocal expression of the alternate-historical form, by Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Château. The work was originally published anonymously in 1836 as Napoléon et la conquête du monde, 1812 à 1832: Histoire de la monarchie universelle, and republished in 1841 under the name of Louis Geoffroy, as Napoléon apocryphe, 1812-1832: Histoire de la conquête du monde et de la monarchie universelle. The text begins with Napoleon’s Russian campaign, which is the point at which the narrative departs from received history, and describes the formation of a global empire in extensive detail—the extended edition of 1841 contains 90 chapters, whose topics include the description of legal institutions, political reformations, military conquests, archaeological discoveries, quotations from journalistic responses to the emperor’s accomplishments, and accounts of achievements in science and the arts. The book finishes, after over 550 pages, with the death of Napoleon in 1832. This is the first book-length presentation of a counterfactual past, and the certainty with which it adopts the format of alternate history is surprising. This first iteration of alternate history seizes the format more securely than almost any other in the century, and without an apparent precursor.

The structure and argument of this chapter reflect the way that emergence and literary history were interpreted in the previous chapter in order to address this puzzle. I begin by analysing Geoffroy-Château’s Napoléon Apocryphe and claim, contrary to other critics, that its apparently utopian presentation of a global empire is ironic and that it should be read as an example of the critical-reflexive mode of alternate history. In the following section I claim that the context for this first alternate history should be understood as the prior tradition of contesting and fabulating the figure of Napoleon in press and pamphlet publications. Francis MacCunn reflects in 1914 on a journalistic culture that distorted and exaggerated the figure of Napoleon, commenting that “the function of newspapers is ultra-writing; and ultra-writing,

1 Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Château, Napoléon et la conquête du monde, 1812 à 1832: Histoire de la monarchie universelle (Paris: H.L. Delloye, 1836); Louis Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 1812-1832: Histoire de la conquête du monde et de la monarchie universelle (Paris: Chez Paulin, 1841). I will be quoting from the extended edition of 1841; all translations from these works are my own.
though it has its temporary uses, is valueless to the historian.”

I claim that this culture of “ultra-writing” is tremendously valuable to an investigation of alternate history; the prose and verse exaggerations of Napoleon in the 1810s and 1820s formed the cultural background to *Napoléon Apocryphe* and generated accounts of Napoleon as something beyond credibility, as if he could only be properly represented to readers in the early nineteenth century through references to literary and mythology. This section asserts that Geoffroy-Château’s ‘first’ alternate history should be situated in the context of this earlier culture in British political pamphlets, with Napoleon as the central figure to whom monarchists and republicans attached competing historical *personae*. By looking backward to this prehistory of *Napoléon et la Conquête du Monde*, we can identify an earlier, incipient alternate history in Richard Whately’s satirical pamphlet, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte* (1819), in which he proposes that Napoleon is no more than an invention of the British press. The publication of *Napoléon et la Conquête du Monde* thus stands as a threshold, the point where increasingly fictional presentations of Napoleon passed over into a format where fiction and history became articulated in a new way.

The retrospective contextualisation of Geoffroy-Château’s ‘first’ alternate history is then followed by an explanation of how alternate histories of Napoleon, by the end of the nineteenth century, had been absorbed into a linear-chronological model of alternate history that concentrated on the possibilities for alternate imaginaries occasioned by military encounters. Military history, as discussed, provides tantalising opportunities for ‘what-if’ speculation. When campaigns and invasions are conducted in the name of an individual, then the outcomes that might have taken place become the unrealised potentialities of that figure. Counterfactual history, with its emphasis on military turning points and lines of hypothetical causation, became recognised as a speculative genre in the early twentieth century, but it was to Napoleon that Edmund Lawrence turned in his 1899 novel *It May Happen Yet: A Tale of Bonaparte’s Invasion of England*, and likewise G. M. Trevelyan in his more widely circulated essay of 1907, “If Napoleon had won the battle of Waterloo.” Lawrence’s novel, and other imaginary invasion narratives of the period, shows how the manner and purpose of imagining history to have been otherwise entirely changed in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As in the more famous tale, “The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer” (1871), the imagination of other historical trajectories is motivated by a wish to intervene in governmental or military policies, with the alternate histories serving as cautionary object lessons. By the end

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4 Edmund Lawrence, *It May Happen Yet: A Tale of Bonaparte’s Invasion of England* (Published by the author, 1899); Trevelyan, “If Napoleon had Won the Battle of Waterloo.”
of the century, Whately’s and Geoffroy-Château’s type of alternate-historical interrogation of historical givens was overtaken by the use of hypothetical pasts to make didactic claims about security in the world we know. This chapter, then, establishes the outer limits of the timeframe for the thesis as a whole: from a pre-Victorian phase of alternate history’s emergence in the period between 1815 and the 1830s to the beginning of the twentieth century, when the category is largely eclipsed by counterfactualism.

**Napoléon Apocryphe: an Imperial Uchronia**

An earlier reader of the copy of *Napoléon Apocryphe* that I have been reading has written a note on a blank page inside the cover:

The dream which has passed through the mind of the author of this book as to the final subjugation of England, & its reduction to the condition of a French province, finds its parallel in the speculations of an earlier English writer, whom I believe to be one Samuel Madden, D. D., one of whose productions is entitled, “The Reign of George VI.” London, 1763.5

There has been so little critical engagement with Geoffroy-Château’s work that it is heartening to find in this undated and anonymous annotator a fellow reader. As in my own research, this comment indicates a wish to identify precursors of *Napoléon Apocryphe*. In this case, the tradition with which the text is associated is a state-political one: works which imagine England subjugated by France. The inscriber does not seem to be too concerned with the difference between the temporalities of a work set in a past which is known not to have taken place and Madden’s text, which is set approximately 250 years in the future.6 This presents us with the paradox that the novelty of a literary work may only become apparent with the passing of time; the rise of alternate history as a category to be recognised in itself makes the defining time-conceit a more important quality than it perhaps seemed in 1836, and/or whenever the above annotation was added.

Geoffroy-Château’s narrative peels away from recorded history shortly after the destruction of Moscow by fire in 1812. Rather than delaying for a month outside the city, Napoleon continues on his campaign—a decision which initiates the departure from actual history. There is a decisive victory over the Russians and English at Novgorod, and Napoleon’s armies are invincible for the remainder of the novel except for a temporary setback against the Turks. This discussion is not concerned with whether these military encounters are plausible, but rather questions whether the author intended for the outcomes of a conquering rather

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5 From a handwritten note inside the cover of my copy of *Napoléon apocryphe*.
6 The full title of Madden’s work is *The Reign of George VI, 1900—1925: A Forecast Written in the Year 1763* (1899).
than a defeated Napoleon to be taken seriously and thought of as desirable. If so, we may wonder how sane it is to wish for (and spend so much effort describing) historical scenarios that are so entirely inaccessible, since they depend on the victories of a now-dead leader. I find in the novel an irony toward these historical desires, achieved both through its hyperbolic excesses but also its surface realism, which is communicated through the detailed accounts of events and their consequences (there are, for example, tables of world population by continent\(^7\)), and through the plausible and recognisable behaviour of individuals and nation-states; in other words, this scenario is “cognitively organised.” An early instance of this is when Poland is liberated from Russia and given her own kingdom. The celebrating Poles fall into a “silent stupor” of disappointment when Napoleon makes it clear that Poland will, however, be subject to Napoleonic oversight like his “other children.”\(^8\) It is an inattentive reading of the text that does not take notice of such reservations that accompany Napoleon’s glorious accomplishments. Book I finishes on a sombre note which characterises the novel: Napoleon is reconciled with his brother Lucien, whom both our history and the alternate-historical one record as the more convinced Republican of the two. This is shortly after Napoleon’s conquest of the Iberian peninsula and, as he offers Lucien the kingdom of Portugal among other favours, we are told that “Lucien felt the last glimmers of his democratic opinions extinguished before these magnificent offers.”\(^9\)

We should not automatically assume that these inclusions indicate a liberal perspective on the part of the author and his intended readers just because we may find the affirmation of totalitarian rule uncomfortable. Geoffroy-Château does not choose to apotheosize Napoleon at Waterloo after his republican self-reinvention; \textit{Napoléon Apocryphe} breaks free from received history when Napoleon is still in his high-imperial phase—and his subsequent rule extends this imperialism. The problem of how to read the novel is made no easier by the scarcity of available information about the author. Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Château lived between 1803 and 1858 and worked as a Judge in Paris. His father was a major in Napoleon’s armies and Geoffroy-Château, after his father’s death in 1806, became the legal ward of Napoleon himself by legal decree. This raises the stakes for the decision of whether the universal monarchy of Napoleon that the novel presents is meant to be satirical or taken in good faith. Hacker and Chamberlain do not comment on the question in their bibliography of alternate history,\(^10\) and Paul Alkon takes a more nuanced view when he claims that the novel

\(^7\) Geoffroy, \textit{Napoléon Apocryphe}, 519.

\(^8\) Geoffroy, \textit{Napoléon Apocryphe}, 15. The work was first published as \textit{Napoléon et la Conquête du Monde} in 1836 but I will be referring to the extended second edition of the text.


\(^10\) Hacker and Chamberlain, “Pasts that Might Have Been, II: A Revised Bibliography of Alternative History,” 324.
does present “the ideal society,” but as a platonic ideal rather than a realistic outcome.\textsuperscript{11} He responds to the fantastical elements of the novel, such as the discovery of unicorns, by reading this presentation of Napoleon as of “a magician who transforms legends into reality.”\textsuperscript{12} Alkon recognises the critique inherent to a narrative that closes off any better society by attaching it to the career of Napoleon, who has already died. He points out that the account only sharpens the awareness that the historical Napoleon failed at Moscow and, as Alkon notes, “there could hardly be a more damning critique of Napoleon’s actual conduct during the Russian campaign.”\textsuperscript{13}

There are also moments in the text when the idea of universal monarchy is made uncomfortable. When Napoleon’s global dominion is complete, General Oudet confronts the emperor in a private meeting and accuses him of “universal despotism” before killing himself.\textsuperscript{14} Five fellow-malcontents commit suicide at Oudet’s graveside, leading the narrator to comment: “It was the last phalanx of free men, and there remained nothing on earth, neither men nor words, to express the idea of liberty.”\textsuperscript{15} I am not satisfied with Alkon’s verdict on this strikingly dark note; he writes: “Geoffroy makes readers balance against their loss the abolition of history’s bloodbaths. Is peace a fair trade for liberty? To his credit, the nostalgic Bonapartist did not evade this question.”\textsuperscript{16} Instead, I read this question as not just one which the author did not evade, but one which is fundamental, for it is the means by which we can recognise the character of historical desire and the projection of these desires into the unique sphere of representation that alternate history provides. The critical-reflexive mode depends upon this type of self-recognition, which is achieved in the manner of a transfigured map—in this case of the world—which we compare to the political and historical landscape in which we live.

For Alkon, the novel’s imaginary setting acts as a reflective space where the constitution of the ideal society can be considered: “The uchronia of alternate history, the form invented by Geoffroy, constantly compels readers to consider the actual boundaries of the possible and the probable.”\textsuperscript{17} In other words, the non-time of uchronia is said to be an imaginative setting in which both fantastical and “actual[ly] possible” elements combine to be weighed and distinguished. Rather than taking the author to be a “nostalgic Bonapartist,”\textsuperscript{18} I believe that the principal subject of the novel is Bonapartist nostalgia itself. The novel operates as more than a theoretical space in which political and social thought experiments can be

\textsuperscript{11} Alkon, \textit{Origins of Futuristic Fiction}, 146.
\textsuperscript{12} Alkon, \textit{Origins of Futuristic Fiction}, 139.
\textsuperscript{13} Alkon, \textit{Origins of Futuristic Fiction}, 144.
\textsuperscript{14} Geoffroy, \textit{Napoléon Apocryphe}, 311.
\textsuperscript{15} Geoffroy, \textit{Napoléon Apocryphe}, 313.
\textsuperscript{16} Alkon, \textit{Origins of Futuristic Fiction}, 152.
\textsuperscript{17} Alkon, \textit{Origins of Futuristic Fiction}, 152.
\textsuperscript{18} Alkon, \textit{Origins of Futuristic Fiction}, 115.
conducted. I read it as a study of hyperbolic thought and the absurdities and historiographical distortions which attend extravagant imaginaries. The comedic moments in the text can alert us to this. One moment of such hagiographic exaggeration occurs when Napoleon comes face to face with a lion. The beast devours the emperor’s horse, but is stopped in its tracks by the imperial stare. When Napoleon then gazes at it tenderly, with “caressing and voluptuous eyes,” the animal rolls over and the two stroke each other like lovers as Napoleon considers how to free himself from this undignified situation.19 Another example is when the subjugated kings dare to query an imperial command; in response and after a violent tantrum, Napoleon goes to the window and summons a passing policeman, whom he declares king of Scotland and Ireland. The new monarch is a loyal but uncomplicated ex-soldier, who has difficulty understanding that he does not need to report back to the police barracks. After repeatedly failing to explain the significance of his new position, the narrator tells us that “they fell silent; the emperor held his head in his hands.”20 The disturbing end of this episode is that the “soldier-king” is found dead, having stabbed himself through the heart with his bayonet.21

That some of the scientific and cultural achievements are meant to be taken as hyperbolic should be clear enough when a child in this era of discovery finds a way to square the circle.22 We might also have reservations about life under Napoleon, when “the people were no more [...] than the shadow of this immense reality, Napoleon.”23 The cult of Napoleon is surely not meant to be entirely desirable when onlookers at his triumphal processions spontaneously expire from excess of joy, crying “Vive l’empereur!” as their last words.24 Napoleon returns to the town of his birth and weeps tears of happiness when Colonel Fesch tells him it has been razed so that no further history should dilute its Napoleonic association: “Sire, if only you could have seen the universal joy with which we left the homes of our fathers! With what enthusiasm we aided their destruction!”25 The episode with General Oudet, when his and his followers’ suicide is said to represent the extinction of the concept of liberty, should be read as the most explicit example of the work’s persistent internal irony. It is not only liberty which becomes unintelligible in Napoleon’s global monarchy; politics also vanishes:

19 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 241.
20 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 141.
21 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 143.
22 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 329.
23 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 189.
24 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 272.
25 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 275.
Politics is only a word without value and without meaning where there exists a universal and total power; [...] in a world so constituted in a single government and with such a power, the word ‘politics’ was no more than a nonsense.26

One of the novel’s most effective strategies is to challenge us to imagine the non-existence of concepts we find it hard to do without, as well as to positively imagine the topography of an apparently utopian society—a perverse thought exercise which is regularly used in other reflections on utopia as in works such as Erewhon, Looking Backward and News from Nowhere. The presentation of a reoriented society in which our usual conceptual landmarks have been erased communicates more than concern about the loss of liberty and the tendency of utopian desires to produce aberrant consequences. This apocryphal world becomes an example of how the practice of Napoleonic nostalgia subjects the imaginary society to a series of distortions—in this case distortions of political concepts—which degrade the utopia and focus attention on the desire to invent historical scenarios. (In Chapter 5 we will see this pattern repeated in William Morris’s News from Nowhere.)

Geoffroy-Château gives us the ne plus ultra of Napoleonic legend, and the decision for the reader of the work is whether to interpret this as a desire for total Napoleonic imperialism, or as a commentary on how the figure of Napoleon encouraged such hyperbolic visions of historical fulfilment. My reading is the latter, and we should note the author’s recognition of how Napoleonic writing tends to subsume and subordinate the entire history of the world into its grandeur, as shown at the start of Book 1 when Napoleon observes Moscow (the city where this account will turn away from received into imaginary history), which is compared to Jerusalem and described as:

This city, with its thirty-two districts, its thousand clocks, its golden cupolas, its oriental, indian, gothic and Christian spires; immense city, undulating between its many hills on which it rests, like a caravan of all the peoples of the world, who had halted there and pitched their tents.27

Napoléon Apocryphe is a novel set, as Alkon rightly points out, in a ‘uchronia’ (the term coined by Charles Renouvier, whose text by that name will be examined in the next chapter), a non-existent historical setting.28 But whereas Alkon wishes to incorporate this non-time into a tradition of futurism, the setting of the novel in a non-historical past is better understood as a meditation on the way that the Napoleonic legend(s) created an ideational field in which myths from literature and the more distant past could be configured. This is communicated in the description of Moscow quoted above. At this point, Napoleon has one foot in recorded

26 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 321 & 322.
27 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 2.
28 Alkon, Origins of Futuristic Fiction, 115.
(doomed) history, and another in the imaginary history that the idea of Napoleon has
generated, and which Moscow represents: the entirety of western history, its religions,
architectures, times and wandering peoples.

The alternate Napoleon initiates a number of historical and archaeological projects
that illustrate how the alternate-historical presentation of Napoleon opens up and subsumes
the entirety of past history. One such project is the recapitulation of legislation from all
countries and historical periods as a consolidation of the Napoleonic code. The fictional
Napoleon launches a scholarly undertaking to establish a genealogy of every nation’s laws to
arrive at the universality of French law. All the libraries of Europe are put at the disposal of a
research team, which is called the “higher council of the revision of laws.” The narrator
observes that “Roman law was not dead, it was reanimated in the studies of the wise juridical
historians.”29 The title of this chapter is “Legislative Revision” and the meaning of “revision” is
ambiguous: it is not clear whether this research exercise is intended to modify and improve
French law, or whether it is a retrospective organisation of legal history to validate the
universality of the Napoleonic code. The emperor’s declaration on history suggests the latter:
“Napoleon had said: ‘Everything in France must date from me’ and he pursued this point by
compressing the past and forcing it to kneel at his feet.”30 It is difficult in this and other
sections to avoid the conclusion that Geoffroy-Château wishes us to consider the violence that
history-writing entails when it takes this form of subjugating past history to the present. The
announcement that Napoleon represents the zero hour for all future history requires that the
totality of the past be recapitulated in the Napoleonic uchronia. This historical compression
recurs throughout the novel as the dead and mythical are reanimated and harnessed to the
present, recalling Walter Benjamin’s warning that “even the dead will not be safe from the
enemy if he wins.”31

The discovery of unicorns is an absurd example of the subordination of the mythic past
to the present; they are brought to France where they are bred and put to work: “Their
temperament is gentle, they are easy to tame, and already the strength of this gracious animal
has been made use of in industry and luxury.”32 A more provoking instance of the conquest of
the past is found in Napoleon’s excavations in in Africa. “Find me Babylon,” he demands of his
team of geologists and historians, which includes Alexander von Humboldt and Barthold Georg
Niebuhr.33 The subsequent excavation of the city and its legendary tower also returns the past

29 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 147.
30 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 145.
32 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 246.
33 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 223.
to the service of the present. “Babylon, cleared from the mass which had covered her for thirty centuries, returned to the air; she felt her depths open and breathe, her roads struck again with rays of sunlight, and her valley reborn finally into the world.”34 The discovery is not only an archaeological one; by engaging an army of workers to excavate the city, it is returned to the condition of a thriving metropolis, “as if she had found her population of former times in the millions of men who repeopled and resuscitated her.”35 Generally in the novel, the sites of historic significance are more important than those of modernity. When Napoleon conducts a grand tour of the four great capitals of the world—Rome, Constantinople, London and Amsterdam—the latter two are said to have “not lost their grandeur, but they offered nothing new to Napoleon’s view or politics.”36 America is the last country to capitulate to Napoleon, but is so feeble by this stage that it willingly surrenders itself to the beneficence and mercy of the emperor. Its revolutionary modernity is said to be a weakness rather than a strength: “This land, which having had youth, had become decrepit among its innumerable revolutions [...] and tended toward becoming an absolute ruin.”37 In this mirror world of an alternate-historical Napoleon, the myopic past is what generates the power and ideas of the empire, whereas modernity’s political history is moribund and in the condition of a ruin.

The (actual) letters of Napoleon from our record indicate a historical self-positioning that reflects the fantastical account in Napoléon Apocryphe. In a letter to Schönbrunn of 1809, he discusses the proposed inscription for the Arc de Triomphe. Not only does he insist that the language should be in French, “the most cultivated of all modern tongues,” but he wants to qualify the relationship with imperial Rome: “I can see nothing to envy in what we know about the Roman Emperors. It ought to be one of the principal endeavours of the Institute, and of men of letters generally, to show what difference there is between their history and ours.”38 This represents not a rejection of the empire’s appropriation of a classical architectural and political inheritance, but rather a desire to avoid a sense of subordination to the past. Instead, the suggestion is that the classical past may be improved upon, or have its true potential fulfilled. He stipulates that “the Emperor’s title is Emperor of the French. He does not want any name carrying alien associations—neither Augustus nor Germanicus, nor Caesar.”39

My emphasis on the attention that Geoffroy-Château pays to Napoleonic configurations of the past in his alternate history (itself a rearrangement of history) should serve to extract the text from a tradition of futurism, into which it is placed, by implication, by

34 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 229.
35 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 230.
36 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 294.
37 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 302.
39 Napoleon I, Napoleon’s Letters, 218.
the anonymous inscriber referred to in the introduction to this chapter, and by Paul Alkon. Alkon’s introductory comments on the difficulties that confront narrators of the future compared to those of the past are relevant and correct; he cites Bakhtin’s comments from “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel” on the “force and persuasiveness of reality, of real life, [which] belong to the present and the past alone,” in contrast to the “empty and fragmented” character of the future.40 It is true that the increasingly fantastical achievements of Napoleon do seem to belong to the tradition of fancifully speculating about what life might be like in the future, such as its improved sciences and communications technology. To read Napoléon Apocryphe alongside Louis Mercier’s L’An 2440 as a futurist text has a valid basis, but I do not agree with Alkon’s orientation of the text toward the future; he writes: “I want to stress that the uchronia of alternate history, from its inception in Geoffroy’s book onwards, easily accommodates implicit or explicit visions of possible futures.”41 This dream of a global monarchy (with technologically futuristic machinery) depends entirely on the figure of Napoleon who has been dead for 15 years at the time of its first publication. Rather than drawing us forward toward a plausible utopian society of the future, Napoléon Apocryphe presents a daydream of Napoleonic fulfilment that encourages us to follow its hyperbolic flights into non-historical time, only to push us back into our own history through the conclusions it reaches. The text is itself haunted by the history that we know and live in: Napoleon is gripped with uncontrollable fear at the sight of Saint Helena (the island on which he was imprisoned by the British), and he repeats atrocities in the Middle East.42 More personally for the author of the alternate history, Napoleon at one point laments the loss of a former comrade: “‘If only Geoffroy were here.’”43 The initials given, M. A., correspond to those of Geoffroy-Château’s father, whom the author has chosen not to resuscitate.

A final way in which the narrative is haunted by our recorded history is in the report of an alternate-historical text within the fantastical chronology: a narrative which records the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo and his exile to Saint Helena.44 Interestingly, Geoffroy-Château chooses to recount this alternate alternate history in the present tense, unlike Napoléon Apocryphe which is told in the past historic, the conventional literary tense in French for relating past events. The “horrible impostures” of the events that we know to be true are furiously denied by Napoléon Apocryphe’s narrator: “It was a duty for a historian of conscience

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40 Alkon, Origins of Futuristic Fiction, 14, 15.
41 Alkon, Origins of Futuristic Fiction, 133.
42 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 264, 215.
43 Geoffroy, Napoléon Apocryphe, 197.
44 This device is repeated in other alternate and counterfactual histories, for example Winston Churchill’s story “If Lee Had Not Won the Battle of Gettysburg”, (in If; Or, History Rewritten, ed. John Collings Squire (Port Washington, N.Y: Kennikat Press, 1964), 259–284).
to repudiate these tales, and to proclaim to the world that this history is not history, that this Napoleon is not the true Napoleon.”

We will see how Edmund Lawrence’s tale of Napoleon endeavours to establish a chronology of ‘real’ historical events in which the alternate history plays a part. *Napoléon Apocryphe*, in contrast, reveals the flatness of a historical perspective which seeks to attach the culmination of all history to the figure who generated such fantasies: Napoleon. We finish in a similar position to Napoleon himself at the end of Geoffroy-Château’s text, entirely isolated by the historical fantasy: “Having nothing more to do, because all had been finished, nor anything further to desire, because no further desires were possible, too far from things and man, he found himself alone in the universe.”

I have argued that the text is an exposition of the fantasy of wishing for history to have been otherwise, and of the consequences of trying to represent this fantasy. The text’s Preface describes this particular type of longing when its author regrets that “it is one of humanity’s fatal laws that nothing attains its goal” and asks, “would man not have the right to take refuge in his thoughts, in his heart, in his imagination, to compensate for history, to conjure the past, to touch the desired goal, to attain possible greatness?” The novel’s accumulation of Napoleonic hyperbole situates the reader in the ironic position of questioning his or her own historical desires, not that of the narrator who affirms “I finished by believing in this book after having finished it.”

**Anglo-French Inventions of Napoleon**

Napoleon’s passage into alternate history depended on the hyperbolic tone and substance of assertions regarding his political and historical identity. As the subject of claims that sought to associate him with figures from literature or myth, he became an equivocal presence to whom different *personae* could be attached. This section will propose a background to *Napoléon Apocryphe* by turning to the ways Napoleon acquired this polysemous character through contemporary literary and historical responses to him—in the press, memoirs, and in Richard Whately’s alternate history that satirises representations of Napoleon. But it would be incorrect to attribute the attachment of these qualities to Napoleon solely as a consequence of writing practices; the multiple and uncertain identities of the age’s pre-eminent historical figure also arose in the realm of legal rights. Before looking at alternate Napoleons as phenomena that were generated in cultures of writing, it is worth looking at how Napoleon also loomed as a spectral figure in the spheres of law and financial speculation—

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46 Geoffroy, *Napoléon Apocryphe*, 353. The condition of being “along in the universe” recurs in the astronomical alternate histories I examine in Chapter 4.
which reflect and anticipate the rival fabrications of Napoleon for political purposes in print culture.

Jean Duhamel has described the condition of legal uncertainty that Napoleon occupied when held in British custody aboard the Bellerophon, the ship on which he had surrendered himself to Captain Maitland. The “Fifty Days” of Duhamel’s title refers to the period between his surrender, during which he attempted to gain protection under British law, and his deportation to the island of Saint Helena. In his letter of supplication to the Prince Regent, written on July 13th 1815 before leaving France, Napoleon likens himself to Themistocles and anticipates “the hospitality of the British people”; Britain he describes as “the most powerful, the most constant, and the most generous of my enemies.”

Napoleon’s bid for asylum and his flight from the re-appointed French monarchy establishes him in the role of a stateless refugee (though his request to Lord Castlereagh of a country estate on which to settle implies a belief in international aristocratic privileges). Duhamel points out that Napoleon was invoking a historical tradition, practised by the Huguenots and French aristocracy post-1789, of sheltering on English soil from political events in France. This attempt to insinuate himself into British life and law places him in an indeterminate position between the jurisdictions of Britain and France, and posed a legal problem to Lord Liverpool’s government. He could not be treated as a prisoner of war, for Britain was no longer in a state of war with France; treating him as a citizen of France would require either his return to the restored Bourbon government or his prosecution for crimes committed against Britain and her subjects. Neither of these options appealed, for either would provide a rallying cause for the vocal minority at home that had adopted Napoleon as the instigator of progressive political ideals since his self-reinvention during the 100 Days of 1815. While this legal quandary was being considered, Napoleon remained afloat in Plymouth Sound, close to but safely removed from British soil and access to rights under British law. Napoleon was visible but unreachable: he would gratify the crowds of onlookers by standing for two hours on the Bellerophon’s afterdeck each day, and the sailors on board assumed the duty of writing in chalk his activities when not visible; they would also fire warning shots to any boats that came too close. He was left unattached to land and law, an object of popular fascination.

Eventually, a solution was found that placed Napoleon beyond the reach of the French and British legal systems. The Lord Chancellor, Lord Eldon, convened a team which concluded

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51 The alteration between “Great Britain” and “England” may be confusing. I use the former when referring to periods in which an expanded sense of the nation can be said to have applied, and the latter when a longer history is invoked.
that “if Napoleon was neither a French subject nor a rebel, he could be disassociated from France altogether. He had been defeated in a legitimate war fought against himself.”

Lord Liverpool seized upon this legal position and suggested in response that Napoleon’s most recent campaign had been carried out “as an outlaw and outcast; hostis humani generis [an enemy of mankind].” This judgement identifies Napoleon as an army unto himself, as though his compact frame contained field guns, cavalry, ships and armies. This can be interpreted in terms of metonymic compression, by which the single figure of Napoleon stands for all the instruments of war he is able to unleash; or as a spectral, polysemous presence who must be contained precisely because of all the forms he is capable of taking: republican, despot, conqueror. Either way, the idea of Napoleon was one of multiple potential identities, and his removal to Saint Helena only reinforced controversy in Britain regarding his identity and the justness of his punishment. Lord Liverpool’s prediction as to the effects of exile, that “being withdrawn so far from the European world, he would very soon be forgotten,” would be shown to be mistaken. When his return to Europe could no longer be believed possible, it is not surprising that questions of Napoleonic identity took on a subjunctive mood: all that he might still do was transferred to the past tense, into all that he might have done.

An imaginary Napoleon was also made use of for the purposes of financial speculation in the London Stock Exchange scandal of 1814, in which the naval commander Lord Cochrane was implicated. The importance of this fraud to an examination of Napoleon as a figure of alternate history is to show not only the indeterminacy that Napoleon’s pre-eminence could produce, but also the way the idea of Napoleon could be put to use to further particular interests in Britain. On February 21st the value of government bonds rose on the reports of Napoleon’s death; the source of this information was a person who called himself “Du Bourg,” who had appeared near Dover dressed in the military uniform of an aide-de-camp. The commodity-value of military news is obvious; equally, false information has a commodity value so long as its truth status remains uncertain. In these circumstances, fictional Napoleons could circulate and be used to manipulate the value of government bonds. It is appropriate, then, that in the events of this hoax Napoleon operates as a convertible form of currency: Du Bourg paid his way to London with gold Napoleons. The false report of Napoleon’s death itself describes the commodity-form of Napoleon: “Bonaparte is dead, destroyed by the Cossacks,

53 Duhamel, The Fifty Days, 53.
54 Duhamel, The Fifty Days, 128.
56 In a detail that is wonderfully suggestive of alternate-historical possibilities, Lord Cochrane is said to have considered stopping at Saint Helena to liberate Napoleon en route to his employment in the Chilean navy (Richard Dale, Napoleon Is Dead: Lord Cochrane and the Great Stock Exchange Scandal (Stroud: Sutton, 2006), 155).
and literally torn into a thousand pieces as if they were fighting for gold.”

There is more to this than satisfyingly consistent symbolism; the Stock Exchange scandal demonstrates the susceptibility of the idea of Napoleon to transformation in Britain. Below we will see how he could be converted into figures of literature and history to serve various political interests. The fraud of 1814 also demonstrates the way that Napoleonic indeterminacy in Britain moved easily into the print culture of the period. Lord Cochrane, who was implicated, presented in his defence “voluntary affidavits” from his domestic staff. These testimonies “carried no legal penalty if proved to be false”—constituting a strange category of claim, somewhere between truth and fiction. The scandal that ensued from the trial was the subject of a large number of cartoons, and published treatment more generally: pre-trial pamphlets and newspaper articles preceded the court case and its verdict then provided daily headlines. Parliamentary debates and post-trial pamphleteering ensured continued attention upon the story, as did the publication of Cochrane’s furious correspondence with his legal firm. The scandal of 1814 exemplifies the way that Napoleon hovers as a dubious and virtual presence in an indeterminate space between Britain and France, and the recurring association between the idea of Napoleon and contested claims about him—even as a non-presence—that proliferated in print.

The formation of Napoleonic myths took place on both sides of the Channel, and his susceptibility to creative refashioning may have been especially acute in England, where he existed somewhere beyond the horizon—whether tantalisingly close, in France, or in one of the corners of Europe from where reports of military encounters arrived in the form of newspaper reports. Simon Burrows points out that the “Black Legend” of Napoleon was produced by French émigrés sheltering in cities outside of France, often in London. The one power in Europe that had no domestic experience of Napoleonic conquest and rule was where his spectral and polysemous presence loomed especially large, and was amenable to both spectacle and speculation. Leo Braudy identifies a similar pattern taking place more generally in this period, as dominating presences upon the stage of history filled spaces in the public’s imagination that resulted from the desire for an ordering principle after belief in divine providence had declined: “As the order of God loses explanatory force, there arises a longing for other orders. To embody that longing the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth

century summon up a parade of world-historical hero-villains.” These “villains” are described as “dark possibilities.” To make these comments in an essay on paranoia and the rise of conspiracy theories, allow us to link the alternate history to other cultural formations which mythologies historical figures.

Linda Colley cites a cartoon by James Gillray in which an imaginary encounter between Napoleon and an Englishman is depicted, “48 Hours After Landing!” As Colley points out, the fantasy of defeating Napoleon on English soil turns sour, in a similar way to Geoffroy-Château’s presentation of Napoleon’s global conquests: all the dignity in the picture lies with the emperor, not the common English soldier.

![Fig. 1. James Gillray, “48 Hours After Landing!” (1803).](image)

Colley sees this as indicative of an unwillingness to (imaginatively) celebrate an English victory when accomplished by ordinary volunteer soldiers. The circumspect treatment of a hypothetical historical event is indicative of the way that speculative encounters with Napoleon can stimulate a reflexive view by which historical desires are critically examined. We can also see from the examples in this section that the production of Napoleonic myths is a process that takes place in the space between Britain and France. This is particularly true post-Waterloo, in the period when the latter stages of Napoleon’s career were determined by

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Britain rather than France: not only did the British dispose of him to a remote island; they and the other European powers had returned the Bourbon monarchy to power and thus restored French political history to monarchical rule as if Napoleon had never existed. Alternate histories appeared on either side of the Channel in the nineteenth century, and we should be prepared to attend to British cultures of writing as contexts in which to situate the publication of *Napoléon Apocryphe* in France—just as the formation of Napoleonic myths took place in the agonistic space of Franco-British perceptions of each other’s history.

**Turns to English History and Literature**

Perceptions of Napoleon in Britain were divided according to political affiliation. Stuart Semmel rejects the view that Napoleon became a discredited figure in Britain after his coronation in 1804, pointing out that his reinvention as a republican during the 100 Days allowed him to be reclaimed by British radicals. An important document for Napoleon’s recovery by the British political left was the new constitution he published and which had been composed by his former critic, Benjamin Constant, which made progressive gestures on questions of political rule and the abolition of slavery. His defeat at Waterloo was a cause for concern among republican sympathisers, for whom it was seen to represent a return to monarchical despotism across Europe, a retrogression characterised by Shelley in “Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte” as “old Custom, legal Crime, and bloody Faith, the foulest birth of time.” This section will examine the various historical and literary alignments that were made in order to define Napoleon, and which served to make him an increasingly fantastical figure. The Pitt government tried to maintain an official line that Napoleon was once and forever a Jacobin, but the profusion of alternate Napoleons in the early nineteenth century testifies to the failure of this view to achieve consensus. Napoleon’s extraordinary (an unavoidable adjective) career tended to undermine any such attempt at a single definition. Semmel argues, in language that recalls the legal position reached by Lords Eldon and Liverpool, that competing interpretations in Britain led to the perception “that Napoleon was unprecedented, a type unto himself, *sui generis*.” This view had other exponents, not only among Napoleon’s enemies; Charles Phillips was also describing Napoleonic exceptionality.

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66 Stuart Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (Yale University Press, 2004), 32.
when he referred to him in 1817 as “the man without a model.” Here we confront the paradox by which Napoleon can be said to be both exceptionally singular, *sui generis*, and also the source of multiple identities. Semmel observes the results of these problems of defining Napoleon: “The difficulty of classifying him would lead a good number of observers to turn their scrutiny to the very categories that he seemed to elude.” This is precisely the character of historical reflexivity that identifies the mode of alternate-historical thought and writing to which *Napoléon Apocryphe* belongs, in which the very processes and categories of historical judgement themselves become objects of examination. This self-awareness of historical thought that accompanied the contestation of Napoleonic identity can be traced from the print culture of the period after 1815 to its expression in the first examples of alternate history as a category.

This “scrutiny” of the categories of classification by which Napoleon was interpreted suggests an interaction between the analysis of recent historical events and the wider questions asked of history itself in the nineteenth century—the historiographical questions posed by figures such as Carlyle, Macaulay, Harwood and Buckle as discussed in the previous chapter. Semmel claims that the ways Napoleon was written about by his supporters indicated a self-awareness of historical interpretation and a provocative historiographical ingenuity among radical political writing of the period—for example their delight in announcing after the death of Princess Charlotte in 1817 that a contender for the British throne was now Jérôme-Napoléon Bonaparte. The radicals’ critique of the Tory government’s support of the principle of monarchical rule took the form of unexpected historical comparisons between Napoleon and figures from British history, and exemplified an *ironic* historicity, characterised by the playful engagement with the traditions and categories of writing history. The example Semmel discusses in greatest depth is the claim by many on the left that Napoleon was comparable to William III in that he represented the principle of popular rule which had enabled the Glorious Revolution of 1688. By opposing Napoleon post-1814, they argued, the Tory government was opposing the English traditions of constitutional monarchy. Responses to Napoleon represented far more than simply divided opinions; they adopted rival historical interpretations. A very similar comparison is made in Book II of *Napoléon Apocryphe*, when Napoleon’s conquest of England and Scotland is compared to that of William the Conqueror.

Another scrutinised concept in Geoffroy-Château’s text and the rival formations of Napoleon in Britain is that of legitimacy, a principle which was central to the debates in France...

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67 Charles Phillips, *An Historical Character of Napoleon* (Cowen Tracts, 1817), 5.
69 Semmel, “British Radicals and ‘Legitimacy’,” 173.
70 Semmel, “British Radicals and ‘Legitimacy’,” 143.
71 Geoffroy, *Napoléon Apocryphe*, 68.
and England about the validity of Napoleonic rule. Semmel claims that the term “legitimacy” first acquired its application to the validity of political rule in relation to Napoleon. Prior to the nineteenth century, it only referred to the rights enjoyed by children born to married parents (and permitted a distinction from those who were not). It was the indeterminate status of Napoleon as a ruler that made this necessary: “His superficial similarity to a king, in the wake of France’s republican experiment, made it necessary to distinguish him from other monarchs by dwelling on the quality he lacked, that of hereditary descent from a line of kings.”

This is consistent with the repeated descriptions of Napoleon by his opponents as illegitimate (politically and by filiation) and a despot. The radical press in Britain were able to disarm and reverse the effect of this accusation by referring the question of legitimacy to English history. The political opposition invoked the Glorious Revolution of 1688 as a precedent for the separation of legitimate rule from the hereditary principle. Leigh Hunt pointed out that legitimate hereditary rule (by popular consent) had its origins in usurpation, and encouraged readers to examine the usage of words which were so politically charged. These arguments could even be applied to make the political legitimacy of the Hanoverian monarchs dependent upon the case of Napoleon: for if they were not able to support a ruler who, it was argued, had won the right to rule through popular assent, as William of Orange (William III) had, then the current monarchy of Britain was forfeiting its own privilege to rule. This made possible the idea of such a category as “legitimate resistance.”

Semmel’s research into the figurations of Napoleon in the radical press refutes the view that after 1804, when Napoleon was appointed as First Consul, he became a discredited figure among British liberals and radicals. Semmel writes that after the 100 Days, “many on the British left, then, believed Napoleon had indeed reformed himself, had cast off the sins of imperial ambition and tyranny, and won ‘a victory over himself’.” These alterations in Napoleon’s career between the republican, despot and renewed republican provided political commentators with the material to perform their own transformations.

The literary canon provided a bank of symbols and characters with which the historical affinities between the past and present could be configured and reconfigured. Byron anonymously published an “Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte” in 1814 which was rapidly republished in a second edition with authorship acknowledged. In the epigraph, Byron takes a quotation from Gibbon’s Decline and Fall that immediately places Napoleon in “a very
ambiguous state, between an Emperor and an Exile.” The first lines of the poem reference Napoleon’s condition as that of “a nameless thing / So abject—yet alive!” Byron then provides a litany of literary-mythological figures that he is like, but not quite like: not quite Lucifer, not a bloodthirsty Roman (for the Roman puts aside the knife), not a lustful Spaniard (who repents), a little like an overthrown Jove or Babylonian ruler, not George Washington but something like Prometheus. Another poem, also published shortly after the exile to Elba, adopts the task of disassociating Napoleon from classical mythology; for although the poem celebrates the “Heroes of other days,” rightfully honoured for their glorious deeds and celebration of war as sport, these values cannot be claimed for Napoleon. The poet writes: “But thee, base man, no generous warmth inspires! / No virtue mingles with thy raging fires!” Living in an age of Christian values, Napoleon is condemned by the poet to “The Curse of Cain”—in other words he is treated as a historical anachronism: a pretender to classical greatness in a Christian age in which such pretensions are criminal acts, and to which modern ethical judgements and punishment apply. There appears to be a determination to dislodge any coherent Napoleonic identity, in particular to undermine any association with a republican or Christian lineage.

It is worth emphasising that both of these responses in verse date from 1814, and although they throw Napoleon into a mirrored hall of literary-mythological reflections, they are nonetheless unanimous in their condemnation of him. But Byron’s subsequent correspondence shows that his denigration of Napoleon was qualified by changing events. In a letter to Thomas Moore from March 27th, 1815 (four weeks into the 100 Days, when Napoleon had just reached Paris), Byron writes that he “can forgive the rogue for utterly falsifying every line of mine Ode.” A resurgent Napoleon could no longer be described as “abject,” nor could the literary-historical comparison still be made to Cain, judged and marked. Napoleon’s capacity for reversal and reinvention exercises a critical and editorial power over texts. After the escape from Elba, Byron seems largely won over by Napoleon, to whom he now concedes “talent and the most consummate daring.” The Napoleonic myth(s) had, it seems, become amenable to Byron’s self-image; after 1815 he commissioned a replica carriage of Napoleon’s, in which he toured Europe and composed poetry.

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77 Byron, *Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte*, 7.
The 1814 poems’ attempts to incorporate Napoleon into a symbolic literary field introduce the turn toward literature that allows him to pass smoothly between the actual and imaginary historical realms. The association of history-writing in the first half of the nineteenth century with romance, discussed in the previous chapter, enabled a porous division between fact and fiction which an expanding print culture was well equipped to traverse. Charles Phillips, writing in Leigh Hunt’s The Examiner, remarks on the variety of roles for which Napoleon had appropriate uniforms. Phillips seems to be most affected by the persona of the military hero, commenting “I have seen him several times on horseback, almost always in full gallop,” an observation which recalls Hegel’s description of Napoleon as an absolute and coherent figure, as “the soul of the world” and “an individual, who, concentrating on one point while seated on a horse, stretches over the world and dominates it.” The situation of Napoleon in 1806 (when Hegel recorded this impression) could be said to have been more amenable to absolute and universal categories than it would be post-1815, when the tumult of Napoleonic reversals and political appropriations were better reflected by a variety of guises and personae that Napoleon adopted and had attributed to him.

The most telling of Phillips’s observations, on reviewing Napoleon’s career and character, is that “romance assumed the air of history.” This comment deserves attention, for he does not say that history became romantic in character, but makes the more surprising suggestion (this is how I read the comment) that the literary concept of romance seemed to attach itself to, or realise itself in, historical events. This fusion of history with romance will be examined in more detail below, in the discussion of Richard Whately’s Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte. For now, we can mark a difference between the reality-condition of historical romance (aestheticising history with the qualities of a literary genre), and an indeterminacy between romance narratives and historical events—an indeterminacy that characterises alternate history in its romantic-utopian and critical-reflexive modes.

Just as political radicals had constructed arguments by affirming alignments between Napoleon and figures from political history (as discussed in Semmel), Napoleon was evaluated by other critics according to figures and categories from literature. In a pamphlet of 1812 that posed the question of whether Napoleon could be called “great,” the author writes:

There remains a test of the approximation of a king or conqueror to true greatness, equally rigid, perhaps, and as universally applicable as any which I have

82 Phillips, An Historical Character of Napoleon, 7.
83 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Hegel, the Letters (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1984), 114.
84 Phillips, An Historical Character of Napoleon, 5.
already enumerated; which is, whether his life and actions will afford a proper subject for an heroic poem.85

There is an appeal here to the characteristics of literary forms and an inflexible relationship between form and content. According to the argument, literary criteria stand above the contingencies of history; a sure way to evaluate contemporary politics is by judging to which classical literary category the material is appropriate. There is also a historicity at work here which treats classical concepts and categories as givens with the capacity to interpret future events. The author goes on to explain that “the subjects of the epic muse must necessarily be, hazardous enterprize, magnanimous character, generosity and unspotted fame, brilliant design and invincible resolution, the struggles, the sufferings, the success, and the rewards of public virtue.”86 Napoleon is deemed to fail all of these tests, and the appropriate manner of his representation is in other forms of art and thought:

The exploits of Bonaparte may glow upon canvas, may glitter in the tinsel of venal panegyric; they will afford much matter of reflection to the philosopher, and exercise the acuteness and the pen of the historian, but the poet who shall attempt their celebration, will have adopted an argument, which must ever be foreign to harmony and inauspicious to inspiration, ungrateful to his labours and sterile to his fame.87

Philosophy and history are claimed to be forms of investigation which are restricted in how they can speak in the world. Both fields of knowledge can speak about the world, and therefore can comment and debate the subject of Napoleon, but the qualities of “harmony” and “inspiration” are granted by Calliope (muse of Epic poetry), not History’s muse, Clio. The argument against Napoleon as a fitting inheritor of classical traditions is identical to that of Buonaparte: A Poem, discussed above. In both, Napoleon is treated as a pretender to classical greatness in a modern world in which such comparisons are inadmissible and anachronistic. A literary form which would be prepared to extend epic or heroic qualities to the history of the modern age would, according to this analysis, be a second-rate art form that could never achieve the stature of epic poetry. Alternate history is this kind of form: generally an eccentric and minor literature whose critique of historical judgement has a discordant effect on inherited categories of judgement and the concept of unbroken historical tradition. We have seen how Napoleon stimulated his defenders in Britain to project him backward into history

85 anon., An Inquiry into the Justice of the Pretensions of Napoleon Bonaparte for the Appellation of “Great” (London: W. Miller & T. Payne; also by Trewman & Son, Exeter, 1812), 53.
86 anon., An Inquiry into the Justice of the Pretensions of Napoleon Bonaparte for the Appellation of “Great”, 53.
87 anon., An Inquiry into the Justice of the Pretensions of Napoleon Bonaparte for the Appellation of “Great”, 53–54.
and to make political arguments from a relationship with the past which was ironically dialogic rather than filial.

Appeals to literary values as the most reliable means for judging recent history would only serve to widen the scope for contestation for the identity of Napoleon. William E. Channing also turns to figures from literature in order to interpret Napoleon—appropriately, in a review of Walter Scott’s *Life of Napoleon* (1827). “We can conceive,” he writes, “few subjects more worthy of Shakespeare than the mind of Napoleon, at this moment, when his fate was sealed; when the tide of his victories was suddenly stopped and rolled backwards.” Channing is casting Napoleon as a Shakespearean hero, an interpretive frame from which it is possible to avoid partisan positions according to political allegiance. It divorces Napoleon from the context of Anglo-French hostility by partially absorbing him into an English literary tradition. Although Channing writes that Napoleon reversed the cause of political progress (returning Europe to a condition of martial barbarism), the allied sovereigns of Europe are also implicated in this process of political regression. Channing praises George Washington and reveals himself as a supporter of the principles of the French Revolution of 1789, but wonders why these principles failed to blossom in France. The conclusion he reaches is that as a country of atheists, “France was too corrupt for freedom, [...] what insanity was it to expect that such men were to work out the emancipation of their race!”

The effect of this conventional polemic against France is to deracinate the ideals of republicanism from any national context. He suggests that Napoleon was the potential embodiment of revolutionary ideals by asking the question: “Did he breathe a spirit which should supplant the old national attachments, or did he invent any substitutes for those vulgar instruments of force and corruption, which any and every usurper would have used?” and concludes that it was the atheist spirit of France itself which was the corrupting force. By implication, Napoleon becomes a historical spirit that might have realised freedom in a country more amenable to republican principles—England, where “[liberty] was rooted in the conscience and reason of the nation.” Channing never goes so far as to express the alternate-historical wish that Napoleon had been an Englishman, but he does suggest (as mentioned) that Napoleon was a suitable figure for the English literary imagination and that Napoleon, despite the destructive failure of his rule and conquests, was a potential exponent of political change in Europe. Recalling the speculative insertions of Napoleon into British life (as a citizen

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89 Channing, *Analysis of the Character of Napoleon Bonaparte*, 43.  
90 Channing, *Analysis of the Character of Napoleon Bonaparte*, 44.  
91 Channing, *Analysis of the Character of Napoleon Bonaparte*, 38.  
92 Channing, *Analysis of the Character of Napoleon Bonaparte*, 45.
deserving legal rights, as an inheritor of the legacy of the Glorious Revolution and as a Shakespearean character), we see how his formation as a figure brimming with other potential histories drew upon landmarks from British cultural history.

The opposition between classical aesthetic categories and the minor art forms which could treat the subject of Napoleon is the same opposition as that between a stable and unrevisable history and one which is open to reconfiguration. This opposition also appears in discussions of the emerging field of mass-circulation journalism—and again it is the relationship with the past which is put into question. The concurrence of the expansion of printed news with the Napoleonic wars is not coincidental. As Richard Altick comments, the wars with France meant that “the average Englishman [...] came to need newspapers as never before.”93 With an increased appetite for news came anxieties about the truthfulness of historical representation in high-frequency publications that were aimed at a wide readership. Henry Stebbing’s article, “Unpublished Lectures on Periodical Literature” (1828), identifies the difference that exists between the writing of history, described as “the first branch [...] of what may properly be called the literature of a country,” and contemporary journalism, with “its squibs, its abuses of a public character, its flash paradoxes.”94 This contrast between the very first and the very latest cultures of writing is perceived in terms of loss—for when writing turns away from history, the instructive identification by the current age of its precursors cuts the community off from the lessons of the past. Stebbing’s criticism of periodicals anticipates a similar critique that appeared five years later. In “On History Again” (1833), Thomas Carlyle writes that “[History] may be called [...] the Message, verbal or written, which all Mankind delivers to every man; it is the only articulate communication [...] which the Past can have with the Present, the Distant with what is Here.”95 Carlyle goes on to contrast the task of writing history with the machinic apparatus of the printing industry that produces “forty-eight longitudinal feet of small-printed History in thy Daily Newspaper.” The term “History” is sarcastically employed here, for even from forty-eight miles of newsprint, “there may not be the forty-eighth part of a hairsbreadth that will turn to anything.”96

Carlyle identifies the true historian as one who can sift through the historical record, discern a pattern, and extract the message of the past. This romantic interpretation of history was discussed in the previous chapter, but what deserves attention is the direct opposition that Carlyle poses between the historian and the journalist, which elsewhere are taken up as

the opposition between truth and fiction. Similar reservations are expressed in Christian Johnstone’s more circumspect article from *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, which sees a connection between “vendibility” and “untruthfulness.” A link appears between popular news journalism and fiction, in the way that commercial imperatives satisfy an appetite for sensational news at the expense of a form of truth that is associated with longer periods of historical meaning than the daily news cycle. Contemporary interpretations of Napoleon are caught up in precisely this tension. Francis MacCunn refers to the unreliability of Napoleonic representations in the “ultra-writing” of journalism. Carlyle makes a similar remark in *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), that “‘False as a bulletin’ became a proverb in Napoleon’s time.” By the time Thackeray reflects in 1839 upon the propaganda wars in the time of Napoleon, he is able to consider the distorted representations that took place in print on either side of the Channel: the French are said to have “adored [Napoleon] like a God whom we chose to consider as a fiend,” and to fabricate in Britain “a monster so hideous, a tyrant so ruthless and bloody, that the world’s history cannot show his parallel [...]. Pittetcobourg.” Thackeray is recalling the hyperbolic excesses of the “Idées Napoleonniennes [sic]”; the fact that hyperbole is said to have arisen between England and France in this period underlines the dual nationality of Napoleonic myth-making. Thackeray ironically refers to the “authentic documents” which

attested the monstrosity of the French and English governments of the time; their authenticity, Thackeray implies, was no such thing. Richard Whately was adopting a similar scepticism when, in *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte*, he presses his critique of the exaggerated journalistic representations of Napoleon further, and declares that Napoleon never existed at all.

**Historic Doubts: A Sceptical Thesis**

Richard Whately’s written output included works on scripture, emigration, household management, logic, weather, natural science and political economy,\(^\text{102}\) a range of scholarship which would narrow when he became Anglican Archbishop of Dublin in 1831, cutting short his professorship of Political Economy at Oxford. To this list should be added a critique of Hume’s scepticism toward miracles, disguised as *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte* (1819), which ran to twelve editions, the final of which appeared (posthumously) in 1865. In *Historic Doubts*, he satirises Humean scepticism, in particular Hume’s essay “Of Miracles,” the argument of which he satirically applies to recent history in order to draw the counterintuitive conclusion that Napoleon never existed but was a fabrication of the press: a *reductio ad absurdum* of Hume’s argument. Another work by Whately that dwelt upon imaginary history was an account of America’s history based on the “Chronicles of Ecnarf” (“Ecnarf” is “France” spelt backwards), published under a pseudonym.\(^\text{103}\) For a book reprinted so many times, it seems to have attracted relatively little attention in contemporary critical journals. A review of a different work by Whately in *The Athenaeum* gives *Historic Doubts* a mention in passing, but does little more than describe it as a “*jeu d’esprit,*” and comments that “if not a very bright piece of wit, it was a very long one.”\(^\text{104}\) *Historic Doubts* is one of the works that prompted a long article in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1849 on scepticism and faith in contemporary philosophy, but barely receives a footnote.\(^\text{105}\)

In the Preface to the fifth edition of 1833 Whately rejects the claim that his long essay was merely playful,\(^\text{106}\) and the scant recent scholarship on the text is inclined to take it more seriously as well. Lois Einhorn refers to a recent republication of the text and summarises its editor’s interpretation that “*Historic Doubts* is not a *jeu d’esprit*, but a serious argument

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\(^{106}\) Whately, *Historic Doubts*. 
showing that boundless skepticism is just as problematic as boundless credulity. [...] By ironically reducing Hume’s position to absurdity, Whately attempted to show that the Scriptures provide valid historical evidence.”\textsuperscript{107} Historic Doubts also appears in Mark Phillips’\textquotesingle s article on “Distance and Historical Representation,” and is again treated as a text whose main object is the defence of Christian faith from Humean scepticism.\textsuperscript{108} The text, in other words, has attracted two principal readings: one as a piece of whimsy, and another as a philosophical defence of Christian faith in the miraculous. I would like to suggest that there is a seriousness of thought behind the fanciful claim that Napoleon never existed, in the way that it represents an early recognition of the capacity of print culture to transform Napoleon into a fantastical figure of the imagination, and does so by proposing an alternate-historical thesis. Historic Doubts belongs to the category of alternate history by challenging its readers to imagine themselves in a world in which received history is in fact the fantastical fabrication of the printed word. If we are to apply the critical-reflexive figure of the map to Whately’s text, we might say that Whately is suggesting that the chart we have been using to navigate contemporary history is a fantastical one, full of invented geographical features which he takes it upon himself to correct—though he does so by postulating a fiction.

Whately’s ironic argument is clear enough; he observes that although other historical figures may have had as many events attributed to them, none has been assigned so many “dissimilar characters.”\textsuperscript{109} This brings to mind the polysemous, equivocal quality that Napoleon had acquired by the latter stages of his career, but it is the operations of newspapers which Whately holds primarily responsible for the fabrication of the myth of Napoleon: “Most persons would refer to the newspapers as the authority from which their knowledge on the subject was derived; so that, generally speaking, we may say it is on the testimony of the newspapers that men believe in the existence and exploits of Napoleon Buonaparte.”\textsuperscript{110} The text repeatedly refers to Hume’s essay “Of Miracles,” and the assertion of Napoleon’s non-existence is an application of Hume’s suggestion that a judicious reader should be sceptical of any fact “which the testimony endeavours to establish, [which] partakes of the extraordinary and the marvellous.”\textsuperscript{111} For Hume, the object of scepticism is not the possibility of miracles

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\item \textsuperscript{107} Lois J. Einhorn, “Did Napoleon Live? Presumption and Burden of Proof in Richard Whately’s ‘Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Bonaparte’,” Rhetoric Society Quarterly 16, no. 4 (October 1, 1986): 285. Einhorn’s own interest in the text is to show how Whately’s arguments on the burden of proof are conveyed rhythmically.
\item \textsuperscript{108} Mark Phillips, “Distance and Historical Representation,” Historical Workshop Journal, no. 57 (Spring 2004): 130.
\item \textsuperscript{109} Richard Whately, Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte, 11th ed. (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1852), 8.
\item \textsuperscript{110} Whately, Historic Doubts, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{111} David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Oxford philosophical texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), para. 10.8.
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themselves, but the credibility of the accounts of their occurrence to the rational individual. Hume encourages a scepticism of “these wonderful historians” who have recounted the miracles of the Christian Church.\(^{112}\) By transposing this argument onto journalism, Whately is replacing these Church historians with their secular, modern equivalents of newspaper editors and journalists. Just as the witnesses to the miracles may, Hume suggests, be motivated by a belief in the good of the Church or personal vanity, newspapers have a commercial interest in the circulation of Napoleonic adventures, and despite their mutual antagonism dare not expose each other’s lies.\(^{113}\) Whately also points to the various uses to which Napoleon is put by politicians, recalling the observation that the diversity of roles in which the figure of Napoleon was cast makes him a scarcely believable character. Hume’s argument neatly applies to the conflicting *personae* that Napoleon generates: from the “contrariety of evidence,” Hume writes that “we entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact, when the witnesses contradict each other.”\(^{114}\) These distortions of current affairs may be an effect of modern journalism in general, but Napoleon’s military adventures were so numerous and sudden that newspapers would struggle to communicate a full and accurate picture of events. Geoffroy-Château also outlined the difficulty of accurately recounting Napoleon’s achievements, describing his conquests as “a *confusion* of victories” and observing that “each day contained two or three battles to commemorate; and as capital cities submitted simultaneously, how could dates be assigned to each of these conquests?”\(^{115}\)

By comparing the writing cultures of journalism to the Church historians’ accounts of miracles, Whately is making a historiographical critique of the newspaper age and its claims to render the world truthfully. To say all this is to suspend the irony of Whately’s argument. It would be wrong to infer that Whately seriously intends to dispute the historical existence of Napoleon; but without reading him too much against the grain, he does produce a cogent analysis of how a surplus of written accounts and the manner of their writing has rendered Napoleon an incredible and exaggerated figure whose apprehension must be compared to the consumption of literature, uncritically by the credulous and sceptically by those of more refined taste and judgement:

All the events [in accounts of Napoleon] are great, and splendid, and marvellous; great armies,—great victories,—great frosts,—great reverses,—“hair-breadth

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\(^{112}\) Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, para. 10.21. Hume’s essay does not extend its scepticism to the substantiated historical record but it does contain a counterfactual proposition: “But suppose, that all the historians, who treat of ENGLAND, should agree, that, on the first of JANUARY 1600, QUEEN ELIZABETH died” (para. 10.37).
\(^{114}\) Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, para. 10.7.
'scapes,’—empires subverted in a few days; everything happened in defiance of political calculations, and in opposition to the experience of past times; everything upon that grand scale, so common in Epic Poetry, so rare in real life; and thus calculated to strike the imagination of the vulgar, and to remind the sober-thinking few of the Arabian Nights.116

The comparison of Napoleonic narratives to Arabian Nights is telling. Even though the initial publication date of Historic Doubts precedes the proliferation of editions of Arabian Nights in the 1820s and 30s, it was nonetheless a historical text whose authenticity was complicated by processes of transmission and translation. Like Napoleon’s own self-presentation, the text constituted an inheritance from antiquity which had been interpreted in Britain for the modern age. The reference to Epic poetry repeats the doubt mentioned earlier toward the recuperation of a classical legacy in the contemporary age—and the observation that its modern renewals tended to be populist, cliché-ridden (“hair-breadth ’scapes”) and of dubious authenticity. Whately’s italicised use of “experience” may be invoking Hume and the argument for empiricism which he is satirising, but there is nonetheless a distinction made between an understanding of history (“past times”) according to experience, and one which is presented and comprehended according to literary traditions. It is worth returning to Charles Phillips’s comment that during Napoleon’s reign, “romance assumed the air of history.”117 This statement about the truth-status of historical events now can be better understood in light of Whately’s satirical argument, which tells us that what we think of as real events are more accurately the transposition of literary tropes and narratives into the factitious environment of print culture and affirmed as historical truths.

Historic Doubts also supports the idea that Napoleon was a figure who belonged more to Britain than to France. His supporters in Britain post-1815 had attempted to write him into an English constitutional history by comparing him with William III. As discussed, this can be seen as an ironic turn of the discourse of legitimacy against itself. Whately practises a different form of irony by suggesting, ingenuously or not, that the public narrative or Britain’s glorious defeat of the French tyrant is simply too flattering to be true—and once again, the form of writing which produces this narrative is described as a debased form of a classical inheritance, epic resurrected as propaganda. Whately writes:

If a story had been fabricated for the express purpose of amusing the English nation, could it have been contrived more ingeniously? [...] Bonaparte’s exploits seem magnified in order to enhance the glory of his conquerors; just as Hector is

116 Whately, Historic Doubts, 30–31 (original emphasis).
117 Phillips, An Historical Character of Napoleon, 5.
allowed to triumph during the absence of Achilles, merely to give additional splendour to his overthrow by the arm of that invincible hero. 118

The republications of Historic Doubts allowed Whately to incorporate the ongoing history of Napoleon into his sceptical thesis. In the Postscript to the third edition, he even suggests that the character of Napoleon was killed off as a consequence of Whately’s exposure of the Napoleonic myth: he refers to “my present boast, of having killed Napoleon Buonaparte.” 119 The Postscript to the ninth edition mocks the credulity of those who believe that the bodily remains returned to Paris correspond to their mythical owner, and even claims that the symbolic act is politically tactical, designed to “kill” Napoleon once and for all and prevent the imaginary emperor’s future return to power. 120 In the eleventh-edition Postscript, and on hearing of Louis Napoleon’s accession, Whately concludes that the history of France is a much-loved and often-repeated drama, whose main character is always a “popular leader of superior ingenuity, who becomes ultimately supreme ruler, under the title of Dictator, Emperor, King, President, or some other”; “Scene, Paris.” 121 I distinguished earlier between a treatment of history which asserts the immutability of the past, as opposed to contestations of the past—romantic or ironic—by which history can always be returned to and revised. It is this latter historicity in which Whately takes such provocative pleasure: each new Napoleonic event, even death, can be integrated into the contrarian thesis of Napoleon’s non-existence. This recalls Byron’s complaint that his judgement of Napoleon was immediately falsified by events, and we might pity the misfortune of the biographer of Napoleon who published his work in the belief that Elba was the final chapter of his career. 122 Alternate history, by contrast, makes claims which are not falsifiable, as they are knowingly false to begin with.

In the twelfth edition of Historic Doubts, Whately adds a final Postscript, in which he presents an account of an American traveller’s journal from 1812, apparently discovered in a New Orleans newspaper. The extract finally resolves the inexplicable mystery of the destruction of Moscow by fire in 1812, an event that both the French and Russians deny causing.

It is above forty years that men have been debating the question:—Who were the parties that burned the city of Moscow?—without ever thinking of the preliminary

118 Whately, Historic Doubts, 45.
119 Whately, Historic Doubts, 55 (original emphasis).
120 Whately, Historic Doubts, 61.
121 Whately, Historic Doubts, 64.
question, whether it ever was burnt at all. And now at length we learn that it never was.123

The “discovery [...] which startlingly contradicts the historical relation of one of the most extraordinary events that ever fell to the lot of history to record” is nested within a chain of accounts: the New Orleans newspaper reports a story from another, in which the journalist meets a Senator, who had heard the account during his travels in Russia.124 As throughout Historic Doubts, Whately makes use of the uncertainty that attends modern (global) news circulation in order to make assertions about the world that contradict received history. What is different about Whately’s final Postscript, however, is that he asks us to imagine a specific counterfactual scenario rather than simply to take pleasure in the perverse consequences of unbridled scepticism. To put it another way, the main text of Historic Doubts only alters history by “correcting” a mistaken impression about the recent past; the Postscript to the final addition differs in that it makes an explicit alternate-historical claim: that Moscow never burnt down. (The destruction of Moscow by fire is also the precise moment when Geoffroy-Château’s alternate-historical narrative departs from received history.)

My periodisation, then, is that alternate history’s moment of emergence is Geoffroy-Château’s adoption of this point of departure, which serves as the threshold where fantastical historical claims pass over into alternate history proper. The aim of this chapter is to show how the nomination of the ‘first’ alternate history (that of Geoffroy-Château) invites an examination of that work’s prehistory, which I have identified as an ironic, or reflexive, historicity that emerged in the early nineteenth century and was given impetus by the relationship between a developing culture of news and the figure of Napoleon. Thus, the notion of a new literary category depends on an element of continuity, but also a break at the point where an ironic stance toward historical givens acquired a format proper to it.

Alternate history and cautionary military tales

‘Richard, I remembered, after I was able to think, that the first time we heard from Mr. Groves, when your father was living, it was the very same day we heard that those awful people had murdered the French King. And then the war broke out. And now it was the very day that they invaded Yarmouth that the second letter came. It is a very remarkable thing—coincidence.’125

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124 Whately, Historic Doubts, 72.
125 Lawrence, It May Happen Yet, 166.
Serendipity plays a role in both plots of *It May Happen Yet: A Tale of Bonaparte’s Invasion of England*, Edmund Lawrence’s alternate-historical novel of 1899. Set in 1805, the novel is both the story of a romance obstructed by a disputed will, and a tale of a Napoleonic invasion of England. In the latter, Groves, a magistrate and leader of a volunteer division, hears a rumour that Napoleon has secretly assembled a navy in Holland. He rushes to London to report to Whitehall, at which point the news of the French landing in Harwich arrives in London. The second plot, of a lost will, is traced back through several generations of the Fenthorpe family and is unrelated to the invasion except that Richard Fenthorpe (the would-be inheritor and bridegroom) discovers the missing will as a result of his movements around the country that the invasion has occasioned. At the end of the novel, when the French have been repelled and the enriched Richard is happily married, his new wife exclaims: “‘So the war did it all!’.”\(^{126}\) This “So” seems to express two sentiments: it reflects the pleasurable complacency of a speaker now enjoying peace and security (in this case domestic), and its trace of didacticism suggests that a complex and open series of events has been resolved into a simple and unproblematic narrative. These qualities also describe the way that Lawrence’s novel resolves the cognitive estrangement of an alternate-historical timeline; we are eventually addressed as readers in *this* world, from which we are asked to consider this variant history as an object lesson from which lessons on security are to be drawn.

The novel was self-published and I am unable to find a single response to it in contemporary journals and newspapers, except to record the fact of its publication.\(^ {127}\) Other works published under the name of “Edmund Lawrence” include *Principles of the Commonwealth* (1884, reviewed in the *British Quarterly Review*), *Theology an Exact Science* (1902), and a letter on parliamentary history and reform (1886, published in *The National Review*). It cannot immediately be assumed that the same author produced all of these texts, but the fact that *It May Happen Yet* exhibits interests in parliamentary process, British history and foreign relations inclines me to accept that the same Edmund Lawrence was the author of these works. Another novel is *George Stalden*, a memoir of the eponymous author and edited by Edmund Lawrence, which is reviewed in the *Westminster Review* in 1888 and provides an insight into Lawrence’s manipulation of historical fiction. This work was published as a memoir set among the events of the American War of Independence, but the reviewer has suspicions about its authenticity: “We lean strongly to the opinion that the autobiographical form is only a cloak for an enthralling and exceedingly clever novel.”\(^ {128}\) This does not lessen the reviewer’s

\(^{126}\) Lawrence, *It May Happen Yet*, 290. [check that these really are the last lines of the novel]


high praise; the text is described as “fascinating as ‘Lorna Doone’; it is as realistic as Defoe’s ‘Journal of the Plague Year,’ and it is as exciting as ‘King Solomon’s Mines.’” A compelling reason for assuming that this Edmund Lawrence is the same as the author of *It May Happen Yet* is the coincidences which allow the account to link a dramatic private story of wealth with the historical events of the time. The reviewer observes:

> It was a curious fate which made him to be the one who suspected the robbery of his uncle's diamonds, who preserved the almost obliterated evidence that his suspicion was justified, who traced the robbery to the suspected murderer of his uncle, and who met with the dying villain of the story at the time of the flight of General Arnold from West Point.130

*It May Happen Yet* is a very different type of alternate history to *Napoléon Apocryphe*. Both contain elements of the fantastic, but in the former this applies to a level of coincidence between the two plots, whereas in the latter it better describes the society and achievements realised by an undefeated Napoleon. In fact, Edmund Lawrence coyly suggests that the invasion of England is a secret rather than alternate history: that is to say that he adopts a similar position to Whately (whom he cites) in suggesting that this invasion *did* occur but that its historical record was suppressed. He refers to contemporary recruiting propaganda that emphasised the risk of an invasion as evidence of such an event’s plausibility; he even proposes that the absence of any records of the invasion implies a cover-up.131 His putative source is an account by two French historians who recorded these events in a book titled “Les Batailles d’Ipych [sic] et de Cambridge.” The similarity of the invasion narrative to the one in *Napoléon Apocryphe* (with simultaneous landings on the south and east coasts and a significant battle at Cambridge) raises the possibility that Lawrence had read Geoffroy-Château’s text. Another similarity is with Charles Renouvier’s *Uchronie*, for in both the alternate history is delivered or based on an apocryphal text which the author is said to have discovered. The happy resolution of events at the close of Lawrence’s novel, with the Fenthorpes married and the French invasion repelled, does represent a closing off of the breaks from recorded history and the course of natural justice that the two plots represent; the novel ends within our own timeline, or something very much like it. In this sense, the work conforms to the definition of a *secret* history: a fictitious historical account which, unlike

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129 anon., “History and Biography,” 118.
130 anon., “History and Biography,” 118. Confusingly, another memoir set in revolutionary times has been edited by “Edmund T. Lawrence”: *A Quaker of the Olden Time: Being a Memoir of John Roberts* (1898). This does seem to be an authentic memoir and I infer that Edmund T. Lawrence is a different author.
131 Lawrence, *It May Happen Yet*, 83.
alternate history, can nevertheless be reconciled with history as we know it; in other words it does not alter the conception of the present.

As in *Napoléon Apocryphe*, the cultural climate of the Napoleonic wars offers a context for the imagination of spectral Napoleons. Linda Colley writes that the preparations for an invasion that never happened encouraged the patriotic expressions of willingness to fight, “a chance for fantasy and wishful thinking, an opportunity for drama.” Lawrence returns to that period of uncertainty and gives events a dramatic imaginary fulfilment. The uncertainty that surrounds the truthfulness of military news in the Napoleonic period is also incorporated into the text: when Groves reports the rumour of an invasion to Whitehall, he is asked if his informant (a smuggler) is telling the truth or “romancing.”133 We might recall Carlyle’s comment that “false as a bulletin’ became a proverb in Napoleon’s time.”134 Lawrence also incorporates stock market speculation on military outcomes that is strikingly similar to the Stock Exchange scandal of 1814, for the effect of the news of invasion on the stock market causes the value of government bonds to drop and a round of betting: “All the bets were concerning the various possible eventualities of the coming war [...]. Many of these Stock Exchange men had time after time, during the year before, canvassed the probabilities of an invasion, and possible events.”135

Lawrence’s alternate history gravitates toward the period and circumstances when multiple historical options were being considered and evaluated; or we could say that he is placing a literary bet on the stock exchange of history. The manipulation of stock markets through false reports also appears in Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*, another novel in which Napoleon looms large but is not actually present. The Count bribes a telegraph clerk to relay a false message, causing his enemy to lose a large part of his fortune. These fluctuations of the stock market in history and fiction illustrate the relationship between stocks and counterfactual history: market speculators who have “canvassed the probabilities of an invasion, and possible events” are role-playing different counterfactual scenarios based on various military outcomes. Counterfactuals are also, of course, used in planning military strategy, as different commentators have pointed out; they involve the rewinding of history, as if by a turn of a dial, to a point at which a particular situation can be re-imagined. This leads us to the explicitly identified motivation for Lawrence’s alternate history: to role-play a military strategy.

132 Colley, Britons, 308.
133 Lawrence, *It May Happen Yet*, 59.
134 Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 204.
scenario in order to warn against a similar land invasion which the author still considers to be a threat at the end of the nineteenth century.

Napoleon’s early victories in *It May Happen Yet* result from his attack from both above and below the Thames. The application of this scenario set in 1805 is to provide a cautionary tale which will inform defensive strategy in the present. He suddenly breaks off from the narrative to address the audience of his day:

Therefore London should be placed in a state of defence now, in this year 1899, while we still have peace, by a series of works beginning at Kingston, going round by Redhill, and meeting the river at Woolwich, not neglecting defences towards the north and north-east, in case of accidents. We hope—we do not say we expect—to see this, or something on this principle, done before we die.  

This moment, when the author addresses his audience directly, represents a crucial difference between two alternate-historical modes: those which are critical-reflexive (such as Whately’s *Historic Doubts* and Geoffroy-Château’s *Napoléon Apocryphe*) engage historical imagination to force us to interrogate the way in which the perception of the past is already subject to arrangements, the structures of which are taken from literature, myth and collective desires. Another mode, the linear-chronological, uses alternate history to role-play scenarios with a view to demonstrating risks or benefits of a particular course of action. It delivers its message within the historical timeline that we know and poses no challenge to our assumptions of the truth of our received history. The word “Therefore” at the start of the above quotation resolves the two timelines into a single didactic message, just as the “So” did at the start of this section. *It May Happen Yet* belongs to this latter tradition, as is announced by Lawrence’s interjection to the reader that certain military defences require reinforcement.

Given the explicit declaration of a desire to effect a course of defensive action, Lawrence may have hoped for a similar level of response from reviewers (not to mention commercial success) to that received by another invasion narrative, “The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer” (1871). George Chesney’s novella also imagined an invasion of England, in this case a successful one by the Germans. This account takes the form of a memoir and has not been included in any lists of alternate-historical works as far as I know, no doubt because it never reveals the date of its narrative. I believe we should identify this story as another alternate history, however, for the way it addresses the audience in an altered present in which England has been subjugated, following the conquest by Germany at an undisclosed point in the past. The opening sentences of the two texts adopt such similar

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137 Lawrence, *It May Happen Yet*, 153.
timeframes as to suggest that Lawrence was deliberately referencing the earlier work. “The Battle of Dorking” begins: “You ask me to tell you, my grandchildren, something about my own share in the great events that happened fifty years ago”; the first lines of It May Happen Yet establish its setting in a similar way: “On an evening in February, a great many years ago—so long ago as the time about when the grandfathers and grandmothers of middle-aged people of the present time were undergoing the process of being born.”139 The purpose of Chesney’s narrative is also overly cautionary, a point made in the first paragraph (and repeatedly through the story): “For us in England it came too late. And yet we had plenty of warnings, if we had only made use of them.”140 The narrative provides a cautionary tale of what might have happened in the past to direct behaviour in the present.

Responses in critical journals to “The Battle of Dorking” demonstrate a wide acceptance of Chesney’s invitation to seriously consider the scenario in a way that It May Happen Yet never achieved. A series of reviewers considered the plausibility of the invasion threat that Chesney had imagined, and although they generally rejected the military risk, they had no objection to the speculative exercise which they took as an opportunity to discuss military and political affairs.141 Both Lawrence’s and Chesney’s texts were intended to participate in a public discussion of national self-interest; both appeal to a patriotic consensus, and though from divergent circumstances, the question that they pose is how a historical sense of patriotism can survive a potential crisis. The author of It May Happen Yet asks: “Was that grand order then founded, the highest political and social civilization that the world had yet seen, to perish in the vigour of the first years of its maturity by the hand of a foreign pirate, the destroyer of nations and their liberties?”142 Chesney’s narrator laments the loss of aristocratic rule, and the degradation of politics to “a mere bidding for Radical votes,” which has produced a degenerate commercial society, “its trade gone, its factories silent, its harbours empty, a prey to pauperism and decay.”143 The appeal of both of these texts to history in order to identify a heroic English spirit which can inform a current, threatened society sharply

139 Chesney, “The Battle of Dorking,” 539; Lawrence, It May Happen Yet, 9. It is interesting to see how similar this opening also is to Richard Jefferies’s After London, a text which will be discussed in the fifth chapter, which begins: “The old men say their fathers told them that soon after the fields were left to themselves a change began to be visible.”
142 Lawrence, It May Happen Yet, 185.
distinguishes them from *Napoléon Apocryphe*, which illustrates how Napoleonic exuberance plundered the past and turned it into an unreal showroom of exotic exhibits.

The shift at the end of the century is toward alternate histories which take the form of military counterfactuals, and which are insulatated from actual history through being clearly established as *hypothetical* past trajectories, to be reflected upon in this world whose history is not subject to reconsideration. This helps us to distinguish the other modes of alternate history from the (often didactic) military re-enactments which began with Lawrence and which I identify as linear-chronological.\textsuperscript{144} Lawrence’s text, however limited its readership, marks (or coincides with) the rise of counterfactual history, which was established as a practice in its own right by G. M. Trevelyan with his essay of 1907, “If Napoleon had won the Battle of Waterloo.”\textsuperscript{145} This essay and others in Squire’s collection, *If It Had Happened Otherwise* (1931) exhibit a delight in the perversity that counterfactual history enables, and despite their spirited historical engagements they pose a model of history as a process of forking paths, that is to say one which is linear with moments of divergence.

The movement in this chapter, from the first decades of the nineteenth century to its close, establishes the outer boundaries for this study. By observing that the first alternate history to consciously adopt the format is one that adopts a critical-reflexive model of history (and which emerges from a culture of drawing provocative historical and literary parallels), we recognise that *irony* is the spirit that prevails over the emergence of alternate history. There is no movement of alternate history from naive beginnings to increasingly self-conscious expression, which is a local version of the claim, made in the previous chapter, that historical knowledge underwent a transformation in the same timeframe that cannot be characterised as a steady process of increasing sophistication or rigour. *Unlike* the arc of nineteenth-century historiography, alternate history does not begin with a romantic model, but with sophisticated and self-aware parody—with Whately’s satire against Hume and Geoffroy-Château’s inversion of an imperial utopia. The first alternate history that I identify as romantic-utopian (Disraeli’s, which I discuss in the next chapter) likewise is not romantic nor utopian in any naive sense; rather, it adopts the romantic-utopian model in a way that is knowing and experimental. It is at the end of the nineteenth century that a simplification of alternate history occurs, at least in terms of its reconciliation of imaginary with actual events—the present perspective upon the past is no longer suffused with historical possibilities (romantic-utopian), nor is it critical of its own historical fabulations. It treats the past as a linear plane, with divergences, which can by revisited for the purposes of entertainment or instruction with the turn of a temporal dial.

\textsuperscript{144} A tradition which thrives today in electronic environments such as http://www.decadesofdarkness.alternatehistory.com

\textsuperscript{145} Trevelyan, “If Napoleon had Won the Battle of Waterloo.”
Chapter 3

Editing Antiquity: Political Legacies in Disraeli and Renouvier

The systematic production of hrönir (says Volume Eleven) has been of invaluable aid to archaeologists, making it possible not only to interrogate but even to modify the past, which is now no less plastic, no less malleable than the future.

—Jorge Louis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”

Introduction

Two alternate histories, written forty years apart, transform western Europe’s inheritance of religion from the Middle East in very different ways. The first is The Wondrous Tale of Alroy (1833) by Benjamin Disraeli, a novel which amplifies the twelfth-century life of the would-be messiah David Alrui into an oriental tale which suggests that a legacy from Judaic history can be recovered for contemporary British politics.¹ This argument (which Disraeli makes elsewhere in non-fiction prose) is delivered here through a retrospective literary style and is enabled by the editorial apparatus that frames the historical romance. The second is Charles Renouvier’s Uchronie (1876), which recounts in painstaking detail an alternate history in which the passage of the Christian religion to the West is delayed by a different pattern of succession following the rule of Marcus Aurelius in second-century Rome.² This alternate-historical account, supposedly written by a monk who died at the hands of the Inquisition in 1601, is nested within a complex series of editorial supplements added by several generations of the same family, who have acted as custodians of the text with which they have been entrusted. The heretical message of Uchronie is that the catastrophic wars of religion in Europe could have been mitigated by constraining the influence of religion upon European culture and politics. The two novels’ positions regarding the proper legacy of religion in the nineteenth century could not be further apart, likewise their use of alternate history as a format. Disraeli implants an apocryphal twelfth-century narrative into Judaic history, as the seed of a future politics which combines secular governance with a messianic element, with Disraeli himself anticipated as the inheritor-to-be of the legacy denied to David Alroy. Renouvier’s text differs on every point: a decisive change to recorded history does not produce a vision of a utopian

² 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: Bureau de la Critique Philosophique, 1876). All translations from this text are my own.
Europe (as the second part of the work’s title, *Utopia in History*, might suggest); the alternate timeline achieves only modest improvements, and we are reminded of the suffering that actual history has imposed upon the family of editors who have had their own lives blighted by religious persecution across three generations. Renouvier gives the last word to the text’s final editor, who closes the work with a critique of the very exercise of thinking counterfactually.

Despite their differences, these two works practise similar historical rearrangements and for a similar purpose: to propose political directions at a moment of political uncertainty. In Disraeli’s case this was true on a personal level; he had recently and ignominiously lost the 1832 Wycombe election and was considering how he might, with credibility, return to politics. Renouvier had started serialising *Uchronie* in the *Revue philosophique* in the 1850s and his text argues for the restriction of religious influence upon state government and legislature in the period following France’s military defeat by Prussia and the fall of Napoleon III. They are illustrative, however, of very different historiographical contexts; the earlier text belongs to a romantic-utopian tradition of alternate history which interprets the past as that which is amenable to creative recovery by the historian (even though it does so with a degree of irony and literary-historical playfulness ). I will be interpreting *Alroy* as a text that makes use of the *excavation* of past-historical materials and also the philological turn in history-writing in order to make its recuperative claims about the past. The ludic experimentation of *Alroy* should not obscure the essential point that Disraeli is linking his alternate history to the politics of the present, which he wishes to redirect by inventing a variant past whose content he imaginatively recaptures. This marks a decisive contrast with the way that both the texts of Whately and Geoffroy-Château make the present strange or unreal by demonstrating the effects of an excess of scepticism or nostalgia to the formulation of the past.

*Uchronie* dates from much later in the century than *Alroy*, and frames its argument for a new, secular politics within different disciplinary models. Renouvier turns to political philosophy (political “science” might be a better term) and takes a hypothetical past as his expository material, but without an underpinning belief in the return of historical values or unrealised potential. As such it is post-, and even antiromantic, qualifying its conclusions with doubts as to the value of such counterfactual conjectures. The editorial supplements mean that Renouvier’s complex work contains both an alternate history and its secondary criticism. It thus belongs to the critical-reflexive mode of alternate history for the way that it treats a rearranged past as (and only as) a thought experiment that brings to light certain historiographical errors, but which may nonetheless have the positive effect of enabling us to reconsider our assumptions about history and contemporary social formations. The critique of

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claims that history would have developed along a particular, imaginary trajectory divorces it from both the romantic-utopian and the linear chronological modes. By comparing the object of critical reflexivity in Renouvier with that of Geoffroy-Château in *Napoléon Apocryphe* (historical knowledge itself rather than fantasies of unfulfilled historical wishes), the application of alternate history moves from local historical contexts to a more abstract historiographical frame, from which concepts such as liberty are examined.

**Alroy’s Poetical History: “Both English and Fanciful”**

Our task now is to prove that the earliest history does contain impossibilities, that it is poetical, that the very portions which are not of a poetical nature, are forgeries, and, consequently, that the history must be traced back to ancient lays and to a chronology which was invented and adapted to these lays at a later period.⁴

Barthold Georg Niebuhr’s comments on the “poetical” nature of the earliest history of western civilization and their interpretation in the present were delivered in the late 1820s and reached an English readership in 1844 under the editorship of L. Schmitz, who collated material from two lecture series and previously published manuscripts. Their arrival in England is almost contemporary with a review of Michelet’s *Oeuvres Choisis de Vico* (from which I have already quoted in Chapter 1), in which Philip Harwood describes a dawning era of historiography when an enlarged pool of data and new techniques for rendering the past will allow historians to produce vivid historical narratives. He anticipates “the historic, scientific imagination that knows how to recreate worlds out of the loose, chaotic elements furnished by chroniclers and bards.”⁵ These quotations from Niebuhr and Harwood both express a determination to adopt a methodological seriousness toward the cultural material of antiquity, and a recognition that early representations may be poetical and require interpretation—in the same way that David Strauss subjected the life of Jesus to critical reconsideration. Niebuhr is aware of the confabulation of myth with historical record by Roman historians such as Livy, and of the errors of modern historians who try to impose a chronology of events across the shadowlands of *ur*-history based on these early accounts. Harwood, with a different emphasis, imagines a new phase of history-writing when a greater range of materials and methods will allow the historian to excavate the past so that lives and stories will spring into the present with all the detail and energy of a historical romance. Placed beside each other, these passages suggest the abandonment of the oldest narratives of antiquity as true accounts, and the

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appearance of modern ones which are able to bring into vivid modern life the tales from antiquity.

*The Wondrous Tale of Alroy*, Benjamin Disraeli’s curious early novel, operates in this historiographical space: when a romantic reception of antiquity was open to revision by modern scholarship, but before an objectivist and scientific approach to history had superseded the desire to find in the past compelling national narratives and exemplary instruction for the present. I claim that the “new style” that Disraeli adopts in the novel was intended to be read as a simulated precursor to the English literary canon, and operates analogously to the proposal of a new form of politics which likewise rearranges the legacy from antiquity. Disraeli connects the novel’s “modern” messianism with national politics in England—a connection which implies a role for Disraeli himself. By emphasising the temporal complexity of the novel’s political argument, which is both retrospective and anticipatory, the relationship between the author’s literary imagination and his early political aspirations can be more successfully integrated than has been the case in existing criticism. Critical responses to the early novels tend to find in them the outline of Disraeli’s political ambitions. Daniel Schwarz imagines a young man contemplating his future career: “Not only did he create imagined worlds in his novels, but the novels played a crucial role in creating his character and personality.”6 In a later essay, Schwarz describes *Alroy and Contarini Fleming* as novels in which Disraeli “exorcised” the flamboyant and immoderate character of his early adulthood.7 Paul Smith makes a similar claim, that Disraeli is trying out future *personae*, but emphasises an ironic distance in the process: they are “dress rehearsals,” or “theatre workshops of personality.”8

Both of these accounts encounter an obstacle in *Alroy*, for the hero is one who fails, whose messianic project ends with a return to emasculation of the Jewish people. Schwarz is obliged to assert a contradiction; the novel, he writes, “enables Disraeli to reconcile the conflict between his own poetic and political ambition.”9 Robert O’Kell maps the events of *Alroy* more convincingly onto Disraeli’s own life by reading Alroy’s redemptive turn to religious orthodoxy as an analogy for Disraeli’s imminent return to active political life after his defeat in the 1832 Wycombe election campaign following charges of hypocrisy and insincerity; in other words, it served as a proxy affirmation of the author’s good intentions and character after a

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9 Schwarz, *Disraeli’s Fiction*, 46.
phase of bad faith.\textsuperscript{10} These readings share a desire to interpret Alroy as Disraeli’s autobiographical (speculative or real) self-projection into fiction. I claim that a more nuanced reading is one that recognises a dynamic, filial relationship between Alroy and Disraeli in which the former is presented as the imagined ancestor of the latter. Disraeli is simultaneously writing his own history, and writing himself into the history of English politics as a figure who belongs centre-stage. Among the alternate histories discussed in this study, Alroy is the only one that rearranges history in order to prepare the soil for its author’s future career to flourish.

The Wondrous Tale of Alroy was first published in 1833 in three volumes and included the shorter tale, The Rise of Iskander. In his introduction to the Bradenham edition, Philip Guedalla stresses the apocryphal nature of the events in Disraeli’s novel, contrasting their presentation to “the comparatively modest tale of David Alrui or Ibn Alruchi.”\textsuperscript{11} In the novel, David Alroy (the “Prince of Captivity”) is the young leader of the Jewish people living in a state of subjection to the Seljuk Turks. Alroy is roused from inactivity and despondency when in defence of his sister’s virtue he kills Alschiroch, the Muslim governor of the province, an act which precipitates his flight from Hamadan to the mountains and to his former teacher, the cabalist Jabaster. Alroy has a holy dream in which he is chosen as “the Lord’s anointed” and Jabaster instructs him to recover the sceptre of Solomon in order to lead his people out of darkness.\textsuperscript{12} Having succeeded in this task, he raises an army and achieves a series of glorious military victories. Alroy forms an inner coterie of military and spiritual advisors and pursues a project of Jewish emancipation and military conquest. However, he has already been affected by the charms of Schirene, a Muslim princess in Bagdad, and he conquers the city to pursue her. Jabaster and Esther, Alroy’s Talmudic advisors, issue periodic warnings to Alroy during his apostatic decline: not to enter Baghdad, not to marry Schirene, and of the need to claim Jerusalem as the seat of his empire. All of these are ignored, and divine opinion appears to condemn Alroy’s abandonment of his messianic role when a mysterious voice in the night repeats the cryptic judgement from the Book of Daniel: “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN!”\textsuperscript{13} There is a failed rebellion of the faithful, led by Jabaster, who is later captured and murdered on the instructions of Schirene. Alroy himself is defeated in battle by the resurgent Seljuk army, flees

\textsuperscript{10} O’Kell, Disraeli: The Romance of Politics, 63.

\textsuperscript{11} Benjamin Disraeli, Alroy, Bradenham edition. (London: Peter Davies, 1927), vi. Guedalla happens to be a notable contributor to counterfactual history himself, whose essay “If the Moors in Spain had Won” is included in the 1931 edition of J. C. Squire’s If It had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History (London: Longmans).

\textsuperscript{12} Disraeli, Alroy, 34.

\textsuperscript{13} Disraeli, Alroy, 166. In the Book of Daniel, this judgement is written by a disembodied hand upon a wall during a drunken feast at the court of Belshazzar. Daniel interprets the words to mean “numbered, weighed, divided,” or, more pointedly, “You have been weighed and found wanting.”
to the desert, is betrayed and captured, and dies a noble death proclaiming his renewed faith in arguably Christian terms: “I shall both sink into the earth and mount into the air.”

One of the most striking features of *Alroy* is the literary style, which seems to echo British canonical authors and literary traditions. Guedalla comments that “the author told his tale in a medium that owed much to Byron, more to the Authorised Version, something to Scott and several touches in the later chapters to the tent scene in *Julius Caesar*.” Some chapters begin with prose that has the metrical qualities of verse; for example, Part VIII of the novel begins with a passage set in trisyllabic feet: “The waving of banners, the flourish of trumpets, the neighing of steeds, and the glitter of spears! On the distant horizon they gleam like the morning, when the gloom of the night shivers bright into day.” Part II opens with rhythmically more complex lines, which also incorporate poetic technique, notably repetition:

Speed, fleetly speed, thou courser bold, and track the desert’s trackless way.

Beneath thee is the boundless earth, above thee is the boundless heaven, an iron soil and brazen sky. Speed, swiftly speed, thou courser bold, and track the desert’s trackless way.

In the Preface to the first edition in 1833, Disraeli gives a brief explanation of his style by quoting from his own Preface to *Contarini Fleming*; he describes the necessity of verse-form for rendering a tradition of ancient, oral poetry which was “rather material than metaphysical.” He does not fully explain how the adoption of “poetic diction” approximates to oral poetry, simply ascribing its use to a suggestion from his sister and to a desire to innovate: “Inversion was invented to clothe a common-place with an air of novelty; vague epithets were introduced to prop up a monotonous modulation.” The self-deprecating tone here contrasts with the novel’s high style and suggests the awkwardness of a public figure who has to explain the exoticism of his writing.

The 1833 American edition appends an extract from a review of the novel in the *New Monthly Magazine* that registers the intensity of the prose: “It is too achingly brilliant. Every page is loaded with poetical adornment.” The use of “too” makes this compliment surprisingly equivocal, and other contemporary reviewers were openly critical of the novel’s stylistic excesses, which Disraeli had announced in his Preface to be an “emancipation from

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14 Disraeli, *Alroy*, 266.
16 Disraeli, *Alroy*, 144.
the trammels of the old style.”\(^{21}\) A reviewer in the *Literary Gazette* took the view that this “experiment on the English language” was “not likely to be a successful one, or to lead to future imitation. It is, indeed, neither prose nor verse, neither rhyme nor rhythm, neither Ossian nor the translation of serious opera.”\(^{22}\) The reviewer is less bothered by any of the individual elements of the style than by their combination and excess: “Good ideas, bad epithets, true pictures, want of taste, and poetical images and something of philosophical reflection, marred by juxtaposition with monstrosities and turgid laboriousness, aiming at effect.”\(^{23}\) The review in *The Metropolitan* is scathing in its criticisms of the novel’s hyperbolic manner; the author of the article provocatively interprets the novel as a pastiche upon literary extravagance:

> In the very first pages of the book Mr. D’Israeli [sic] commences his satire. The system of quoting from the sacred and inspired authors [...] has been ably ridiculed by a chorus of maidens, who constantly interrupt the soliloquy of the hero, and the reader’s flow of ideas, by screaming out bits of Isaiah, about half a mile off.\(^{24}\)

Of Disraeli’s declaration of the novel’s “new style,” the reviewer comments: “It is certainly very clever, and Mr. D’Israeli has, we trust, given the death-blow to all ‘new styles’.”\(^{25}\)

Approaching the novel at almost two centuries’ remove permits a reading which is less concerned with the success or failure of its style, and which instead looks at how the stylistic experimentation reproduces the argument about national politics which is at the heart of *Alroy*. The two most important literary influences seem to be the *King James Bible* and Shakespeare, but the influence of the latter is more pervasive than simply reprising the tent scene of *Julius Caesar*. Diction such as “verily,” “passing fair” and “pry’thee” seems to derive from a much earlier period of English literature. There are also semantic turnings upon the meanings of words which recall (to my ear) Shakespearean dialogue, for example Alroy’s response to his uncle’s conciliatory commendation of “obedience.” He replies: “‘A word of doubtful import; for to obey, when duty is disgrace, is not a virtue’.\(^ {26}\) There are the dramatic conventions of soliloquy and the reporting of action ‘off-stage’, which again echo much earlier drama; during the attempted rebellion by the faithful against Alroy, the hero issues a series of rapid commands and commentary: “Abidan’s troop arrived with succour, eh! I doubt it not. I


\(^{26}\) Disraeli, *Alroy*, 5.
expected them. Open to none. They force an entrance, eh! I thought so. So that javelin has killed a traitor. Feed me with arms. I'll keep the gate. Send again to Asriel. Where's Pharez?" 

Conventions such as soliloquy and the reports of military events serve to focus attention on the character and political predicament of Alroy. The excitement of the many battles is carefully excluded from the narrative frame, and instead circumscribed in the language of the characters' descriptions of them; the military engagements become decorative rather than central to the story. Even when action is narrated, for example Alroy’s killing of Alsiroch, it is estranged by hyperbole and anachronistic syntax and diction: “Pallid and mad, he swift upsprang, and he tore up a tree by its lusty roots, and down the declivity, dashing with rapid leaps, panting and wild, he struck the ravisher on the temple with the mighty pine.”

This has the effect of foregrounding the central concern in Alroy: the tension between messianism and secular politics, as experienced both in the political realm and internally. Alroy’s dialogues with religious and military figures provide the medium for the novel’s reflections on politics. Soliloquies and conversation with Schirene reframe the political questions in an interior space, as when Alroy and Schirene have fled to the desert:

‘The past is a dream,’ said Alroy. ‘So sages teach us; but until we act, their wisdom is but wind. I feel it now. Have we ever lived in aught but deserts, and fed on aught but dates? Methinks ‘tis very natural. But that I am tempted by the security of distant lands, I could remain here, a free and happy outlaw.”

It should be clear from the two previous quotations that different periods of literary history are being invoked: the Alroy who “swift upsprang” is, in terms of diction, a more antiquated figure than the Alroy who muses “Have we ever lived in aught but deserts?” Not only are the sounds of battle muted through being placed outside the narrative frame, and action rendered decorative through elaborately antiquated language; there is also a sense of emerging (and romantic) modernity in the novel, foregrounded in the thoughts and speech of Alroy on the subjects of love and politics, linguistically marked as later in temperament and expression to the twelfth-century literary setting of military adventure and cabalistic religion. The novel thus contains, internally and stylistically, a forward temporal trajectory. This is achieved through the relative modernity of the hero’s language, which belongs more to the time of Alroy’s composition than that of the King James Bible. However, the distribution of Shakespearean language among the characters is pointedly inappropriate to the speakers in the novel.

The echoes are striking. Before his call to action, Alroy is disconsolate and alone; he seems to be channelling the character of Hamlet in general, and echoing the “To be or not to

27 Disraeli, Alroy, 197.
28 Disraeli, Alroy, 16.
29 Disraeli, Alroy, 233.
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be” soliloquy in particular: “To breathe, to feed, to sleep, to wake and breathe again, again to feel existence without hope; if this be life, why then these brooding thoughts that whisper death were better?”30 Later, when Alroy has betrayed his messianic calling for Muslim luxury, he quotes Macbeth’s futile protestation exactly: “‘I bear a charmed life.’”31 Here, *Macbeth* provides an analogy to the events which affirms what should already be apparent: that Alroy is fated to be destroyed for having violated a sacred code. Affinity with Shakespearean characters is complicated when Jabaster and Esther, plotting against Alroy, paraphrase the reflections of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth prior to the murder of Duncan: “‘If ‘tis to be done, let it be done at once’,” says Jabaster.32 Esther, standing above the sleeping Alroy with a knife in her hand, muses: “‘Can the Guilty sleep like the Innocent?’”33 There is a disorienting disjuncture between the speakers and their implied Shakespearean counterparts. Alroy is, by implication, both Macbeth and Duncan.

The reviewer in *The Metropolitan* observed the chorus of maidens “screaming bits of Isaiah,” and there are no doubt more biblical echoes than I am able to trace. One particular moment is worth referring to, however, for it compresses Shakespearean and biblical echoes into a single passage. At the end of the novel, Alroy regains his spiritual conviction when offered mercy and freedom in exchange for renouncing the Judaic faith. He responds: “‘Is this thy freedom? Get thee behind me, tempter! Never, never, never. Not a jot, not a jot.’”34 The quotation from the Book of Matthew (“‘Get thee behind me, tempter’”) stands side by side with an exact repetition of Othello’s denial of perturbation (“‘Not a jot, not a jot’”) (III.iii.215), but the Shakespearean context is wholly inappropriate to Alroy’s. Othello is denying anxiety about Desdemona’s fidelity and signalling his imminent descent into paranoia; Alroy is proclaiming his realignment with a faith that is a synthesis of Judaism and Christianity. If we read this medley of influences as the echoes of texts from the English literary canon, it sounds cacophonous (or careless). But if we read these references not as echoes but as the *foreshadowing* of later poets and translators, their unexpected distribution becomes less important than their role as literary precursors, at which point the political argument of the novel emerges.

Nick Groom observes that one technique for producing a convincing literary forgery is to plant incipient traces of later literary styles. Thus, Thomas Chatterton translated quotations from Shakespeare into medieval English and attributed them to the apocryphal Thomas

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31 Disraeli, *Alroy*, 198. An attentive reader would no doubt imagine an accent above the “e” and pronounce “charmed” as a dysyllabic trochee.
33 Disraeli, *Alroy*, 194.
34 Disraeli, *Alroy*, 244.
Rowley, who then appeared as the antecedent of the Bard and others.\textsuperscript{35} I do not want to take the side of \textit{Punch} magazine and its racist representations of Disraeli as an oriental trickster and Jewish con-artist; to interpret \textit{Alroy} as a sophisticated form of forgery is not, I hope, to repeat this stereotyping of Disraeli. Manufactured precursorship, even when only on the level of style, suggests the authenticity of a literary lineage and a political history that connects twelfth-century Jewish messianism to contemporary English politics. The comparison made by a contemporary reviewer (quoted above) between Disraeli and the Ossian poet make forgery a compelling interpretive notion.\textsuperscript{36} It also highlights an important difference between the Ossian poems and \textit{Alroy}: the former work to disentangle a nationality from its subsumption into Great Britain, and do so by asserting a singular Gaelic diction and aesthetic identity. \textit{Alroy} does precisely the opposite, for it attempts to \textit{synthesise} Jewish messianism and history with English culture and history—with literary style as the technique by which one is grafted onto the other. It proposes a hybridity which exists within Englishness. A letter written to his father in 1830, during his middle-eastern expedition, reflects the historical and national indeterminacy that Disraeli wished to embrace, both in his own life and as a national-political argument.

Having described the exotic dress he chooses to wear on his travels, he recounts the bewildering effect his costume has on a Greek doctor: “‘Questo vestito Inglese o di fantasia [‘Is your costume English or the product of your own fancy’]?’ he aptly asked. I oracularly replied ‘Inglese e fantastica’ [‘It is both English and fanciful’].”\textsuperscript{37}

\section*{Forging the Nation}

The style of \textit{Alroy} is intended, I claim, to serve as a prehistory of British literature—one which inserts into that history a political promise to which Disraeli himself is the fulfilment. Samuel Taylor Coleridge saw in the linguistic tradition of the English clerisy, the \textit{lingua communis} on which English civilization depended.\textsuperscript{38} Disraeli similarly wishes to found a view of cultural and political life upon a literary tradition, but is prepared to manufacture that tradition himself and present himself as its culmination. Thus, although the political argument of the novel works through retrospection (and alternate-historical retroaction), it also gestures toward an altered future: the present day of the 1830s and beyond. It is worth noting that the events of novel, although they take place in remote history, occur closer to the date of its

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\item \textsuperscript{35} Nick Groom, \textit{The Forger’s Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature} (London: Picador, 2002), 176.
\item \textsuperscript{36} anon., “Review: The Wondrous Tale of Alroy,” 146.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Benjamin Disraeli, \textit{Benjamin Disraeli Letters: 1815-1834}, vol. 1 (University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1982), 171.
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composition than to the earlier settings of other nineteenth-century novels which render early religious history (Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Newman’s *Callista: A Tale of the Third Century*, Edwin Abbott Abbott’s *Philochristus: Memoirs of a Disciple of the Lord* or Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*). By choosing the intervening and less familiar timeframe of the twelfth-century Middle East, Disraeli makes it possible for the distant past to stand as proto-modern. It also allows him to borrow and transform a dominant historiographical narrative through which the earliest recorded past was inescapably framed: as the decline of classical civilization and the rise, albeit persecuted, of Christian religion. The trajectory of *Alroy*, crucially, is one that intimates a future period of religious fulfilment *on this earth*, for *Alroy’s* uncompleted conquest of the Holy Land, and Jerusalem in particular, remains a project for the future. The topography of the novel reinforces this future orientation. Charles Bucke, in a guidebook to the *Ruins of Ancient Cities*, explains the difference in the temporalities of two capitals of empire and civilization:

> In the whole universe there were only two cities interesting alike to every member of the great Christian commonwealth, to every citizen of the civilized world, whatever may be his tribe or nation—Rome and Jerusalem. The former calls up every classic recollection; the latter awakens every sentiment of devotion; the one brings before our eyes all the splendour of the present world; the other all the glories of the world to come.  

*Alroy* suggests that “the glories of the world to come” are achievable in this world, as a romantic-utopian future or garden to be lived in. The anticipation is messianic, but transformed into a secular register as a form of modern politics. After *Alroy’s* defeat, the anticipatory note becomes explicit when the incomplete project of the hero is described as one that will be recovered in the future. Miriam, the unwavering moral presence in the novel, addresses *Alroy* in prison as he awaits punishment.

> ‘And so, sweet brother, perchance some poet, in some distant age, within whose veins our sacred blood may flow, his fancy fired with the national theme, may strike his harp to Alroy’s wild career, and consecrate a name too long forgotten?’

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40 Disraeli, *Alroy*, 255.
Disraeli’s letters and his entry in the Mutilated Diary, in which he writes that Alroy is the portrayal of “my ideal ambition,” make it difficult to avoid the interpretation that his own career is being anticipated.

The politics of Alroy describe a modern political sensibility, illustrated when Alroy berates Jabaster for his desire to massacre the defeated Muslims of Bagdad: “‘Fanatic! I’ll send him to conquer Judah. We must conciliate. Something must be done to bind the conquered to our conquering fortunes.’” By choosing “toleration,” rejecting the massacre of “the vast majority, and most valuable portion of my subjects” and defending the interests of his empire, Alroy is extending a judicious care over his imperial domains—in contrast to an old-testament rule of retribution. Alroy again criticises Jabaster’s Cabalistic and benighted convictions and their unsuitability for pragmatics of imperial rule: “‘I see, the caverns of the Caucasus are not a school for empire.’” Alroy wishes to depart from a form of rule and “‘old traditions, which, if acted upon, would render government impractical.’” While it is true that the novel adopts a recognisable template in which the hero abandons his faith and succumbs to the temptations of power, that is not to say that his character is meant to be condemned. Rather, Alroy is anachronistic, representative of a politics which is out of place in the the Middle East in the twelfth century, but which is perhaps appropriate for the politics of nineteenth-century Britain. The judgment passed on Alroy, that he has been found wanting (“‘Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin!’”), perhaps does not refer to Alroy’s spiritual failure—as Jabaster interprets it—but to the untimeliness of being born too early.

Patrick Brantlinger observes that although Disraeli’s Conservatism had points in common with Burke, his organic nationalism differed significantly for its rejection of Whiggish progressivism and embracing manufacturing and commerce as central to modern prosperity. He also differed from figures such as Macaulay or Scott by replacing “Anglo-Saxonism” with assertions of the living force of Judaism in European culture. By rejecting a sense of English, or British, culture as having its foundation in the Christian and Teutonic eclipse of the Roman Empire, Disraeli is able to present an alternative national genealogy, in which the Judaic element has always been present and awaiting recuperation. This rewriting of history contains a political proposition: to reject a course of history that inherited the liberal legacy of the

41 The Mutilated Diary is so named due to Disraeli’s later excisions to the document; it is included as an Appendix to Volume 1 of the Benjamin Disraeli Letters.
42 Disraeli, Benjamin Disraeli Letters, 1:447.
43 Disraeli, Alroy, 149.
44 Disraeli, Alroy, 159.
45 Disraeli, Alroy, 147.
46 Disraeli, Alroy, 166.
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Glorious Revolution—which Disraeli saw instead as the destruction of England’s cultural foundations of the Church and Aristocracy. Instead, he wished to propose another lineage, which saw Christianity as “completed Judaism.” Paul Smith captures Disraeli’s historical revisionism and its relation to his political ambitions when he writes that Disraeli’s impact on the English political scene would be effected through a radical transformation of how the nation understood its own past:

The vindication of national genius did not require in England the political revolution which was often its apparent pre-condition elsewhere, but it did require, for Disraeli, a near-revolution in the conceptualisation of the national past, national tasks, and national destiny, in the accomplishment of which his own genius could achieve its complete naturalisation.

This revision of history, and the desire to rewrite the genealogy of English politics, is an impulse for which alternate history is a singularly appropriate format.

Robert O’Kell applies the same idea of self-reinvention toward Disraeli’s Vindication of the English Constitution in a Letter to a Noble and Learned Lord (1835). This open letter was an elaborate defence of the House of Lords, with deliberate echoes of Burke’s Letter to a Noble Lord, and served as an argument for a repositioned Tory party. This national party was to have affinities with Hebraic traditions, as Disraeli makes clear: “The English are in politics as the old Hebrews were in religion, a favoured and peculiar people.” O’Kell writes that the text “reveals a need on his part to find ideological ancestors whose lives vindicate his chosen political identity”; David Alroy (and his fabricated heroic exploits) becomes such an ancestor. This is applied to national identity, and O’Kell adds that “Disraeli, convinced of his own nobility and having no actual estates, simply claims the whole of England as his inheritance.” In a foreshadowing of the argument I am making about Alroy, Lord Eliot writes to Disraeli on the Vindication’s celebration of Henry St John: “In reading your sketch of Bolingbroke I could not help thinking that if opportunities are not withheld, you may become what he might have been.” This is precisely the temporality that Disraeli’s self-presentation relies upon—in

\[\text{Daniel R. Schwarz, ““Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin’: Jewish Perspectives in Disraeli’s Fiction,” Jewish History 10, no. 2 (October 1, 1996): 38.}\]

\[\text{Smith, “Disraeli’s Politics,” 83.}\]

\[\text{Smith, “Disraeli’s Politics,” 81.}\]

\[\text{O’Kell, Disraeli: The Romance of Politics, 192.}\]

\[\text{Benjamin Disraeli, Vindication of the English Constitution in a Letter to a Noble and Learned Lord (London: Saunders and Otley, 1835), 205. Comparisons between Disraeli’s and Matthew Arnold’s “Hebraism” are not productive as Arnold treats this legacy in terms of moral imperatives and is not concerned with Hebraism as messianism.}\]

\[\text{O’Kell, Disraeli: The Romance of Politics, 190, 195.}\]

\[\text{O’Kell, Disraeli: The Romance of Politics, 190, 195.}\]

\[\text{O’Kell, Disraeli: The Romance of Politics, 201.}\]
politics, as O’Kell compellingly shows, and also as a literary-heroic figure in Alroy. Thus, Disraeli’s alternate history integrates an argument about national politics with a focus on individual historical figures whose lives provide a legacy which is available for reclamation. The articulation of individual biography with national character is a historiographical view that links Disraeli to contemporary models of historical interpretation, for example Barthold Georg Niebuhr and Thomas Arnold.

Arnold was an enthusiastic supporter of Niebuhr; Linda Dowling states that they both shared with Burke a hatred of sudden political change and an organic sense of history and nation. Those mythic elements of history—the “impossibilities” that Niebuhr refers to in the quotation at the start of this chapter—are not to be thrown out, but interpreted as the ideas which communicate the culture and identity of nations. Arnold, in his inaugural lecture as Regius Chair of History at Oxford in 1841, made the point that interior character of a nation is primary in history, not dramatic events themselves (for example, wars): “It is this inward life after all which determines the character of the actions and of the man.” This fusion of individual and national character is expressed in Arnold’s maxim that History is “the biography of a nation.” This approach also brings with it a method for interpreting historical materials. Arnold points out that just as we know an individual life by examining its private letters, so we know a nation by its science, art and literature. We might also recall Isaac D’Israeli’s secret histories ("the supplement of history itself"), which drew upon previously unavailable private correspondence, and engaged gossip and (speculative) psychological character for the delineation of historical figures. Benjamin Disraeli wrote the Introduction to the collection of his father’s writings in which these secret histories were included, and described described his historical writings on England as “illustrative of its literary and political history.”

In a view of national history which privileges the role of ideas and literature alongside, sometimes above, historical events, Disraeli’s romance establishes an indeterminate ground between fiction and historical accuracy: a literary account which makes claims about the genealogical constitution of English (British) politics cannot be factually incorrect, for it consists of non-verifiable assertions which are, themselves, as literature, the primary historical material to which they refer. The counterfactual content of Alroy—the amplification of the career of David Alrui—becomes a vehicle by which the more important truth of the Judaic

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58 Arnold, *Lectures on Modern History*, 41.
legacy in English can be communicated. Disraeli is working with history’s primary materials, recalling the statements by Niebuhr and Harwood on the historian’s need to interpret the “ancient lays” and “chaotic elements furnished by chroniclers and bards,” but is also forging the earliest sources in order to facilitate a political reorientation in the present. The synthetic style that simulates a literary history, which runs parallel to political history, is thus in the equivocal position of being both counterfeit and the expression of the profoundest of truths; it is forging the nation in both senses of the verb, an ambiguity only possible within the context of a romantic historiography that treats art and literature as the inner character of a nation.

**Fiction & Excavation**

*Alroy* was written immediately after Disraeli’s return from his mediterranean and middle-eastern travels in 1830-31; his correspondence from that period and after provide some insights into the novel’s composition and its author’s intentions. In a letter to his sister of March 1831, he describes his first sight of Jerusalem, from the Mount of Olives:

In the front is the magnificent mosque built upon the site of the Temple, with its beautiful gardens and fantastic gates—a variety of domes and towers rise in all directions, the houses are of a bright stone. I was thunderstruck. I saw before me apparently a gorgeous city. Nothing can be conceived more wild and terrible and barren than the surrounding scenery.62

The hero’s perspective in the novel echoes the epistolary description; Alroy also approaches from a high grove and sees the Holy City from across a ravine: “Nothing could be conceived more barren, wild, and terrible than the surrounding scenery, unillumined by a single trace of culture.”63 The description is an almost *verbatim* repetition of Disraeli’s letter, but without the mosque in the foreground (as-yet unbuilt in the twelfth century). A third account of the view is provided in an endnote to the revised, 1845 edition of *Alroy*: “The finest view of Jerusalem is from the Mount of Olives. It is little altered since the period when David Alroy is supposed to have gazed upon it, but it is enriched by the splendid Mosque of Omar, built by the Moslem conquerors on the supposed site of the temple.”64 The “editor” continues with a compelling personal anecdote: “I endeavoured to enter it at the hazard of my life. I was detected, surrounded by a crowd of turbaned fanatics, and escaped with difficulty.”65 Unless Disraeli withheld this incident from his sister so as not to alarm her, it has been invented to give the editor—and by close association, Disraeli—the authority of an adventurous scholar who has

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63 Disraeli, *Alroy*, 79.
spent time in the field. Schwarz identifies a tactical distinction between the two writers, identifying the editor as “a Jewish historian and scholar.” This role of the historian-scholar is emphasised in the revised edition of 1845, in which the dedication to his sister is removed and replaced by the Preface written by this character of the editor. But the authorial split is immediately traversed by the fact that the Preface is endnoted “Grosvenor Gate: July 1845”—thus geographically tying the editor to Disraeli’s West-London territory. The mask of the Jewish historian-scholar is deliberately transparent, and the novel’s status, as romance or true history, is left uncertain.

The shifting personae of author, editor and hero (which the different descriptions of Jerusalem alert us to) illustrate the complex way in which the novel plays with authenticity. After his return, when the manuscript of Alroy has been temporarily put aside, Disraeli has a telling exchange of letters on the title of the forthcoming Contarini Fleming. H. H. Milman, Disraeli reports, had suggested that the novel not be called a Romance, so that it might be taken to be a real history. Disraeli responds to John Murray: “Certainly it were most desirable that the title should not disturb the illusion of Reality [...] Nor do I see that the term Romance precludes the notion of a veracious History, for on more than one occasion, a fabulous designation has been given to a very authentic narrative.” Just as the editor of Alroy seemed at once to be an authoritative source of information while at the same time a romantic adventurer (and in both cases attached to Disraeli himself), so here Disraeli denies any contradiction between a “Romance” and “veracious History,” which is precisely the space in which the romantic-utopian mode of alternate history operates. My claim is that despite Disraeli’s self-interest in presenting himself as the inheritor of a simulated literary-historical legacy, the haziness of distinction between historical truth and historical fiction should be placed in a wider context of nineteenth-century historiography, in which higher truths (Carlyle’s “eternal inner Fact[s]”) supersede an accurate chronicle of events. To finish this analysis of Alroy’s “discovery” of the past, I will turn to excavation as a practice which, like history-writing, also enabled imaginative truth-claims before it became a rigorously objectivist discipline.

A letter to his father during his middle-eastern expedition describes the empty landscape around Yanina, and the felt presence of a historical past: “You often find your horses course on the foundation of a village without being aware of it, and what at first appears the

66 Schwarz, Disraeli’s Fiction, 49.
68 Zimmerman describes the development of archaeology in a way which is analogous and contemporaneous to developments in historiography; beginning with haphazard practices, around the mid-century it became a modern scientific practice, seen as a sub-discipline of Geology.
dry bed of a torrent turns out to be the backbone of the skeleton of a ravaged town.”69 We might then think of Disraeli’s project, in Alroy, of excavating and repopulating these submerged landscapes as comparable to Phillip Harwood’s description of the historic imagination, able to “reconstruct the skeleton from the single bone, and clothe that skeleton with flesh and blood, and breathe into it a living soul.”70 This power of the imagination to reanimate the bones of previous civilizations had been stimulated in the early 1830s by multiple publications on the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum; we recall the excavation of Babylon by Napoleon in Napoléon Apocryphe where the city is reborn and resuscitated, and that the first archaeological examinations of Pompeii were conducted by the French during Napoleon’s occupation of Naples in 1812.71 The Literary Gazette kept its readers up to date in 1831 with an account of the “Actual State of Excavations at Pompeii”;72 in 1835 Sumner Lincoln Fairfield began re-publishing “The Last Night of Pompeii: A Poem in Three Cantos,” explaining in his disgruntled introduction that the poem had received very little critical notice on first publication in 1831, “until Mr Bulwer vouchsafed to acknowledge its existence by plundering its chief incidents and best descriptions.”73 There was a new edition in 1832 of William Gell’s Pompeiana: The Topography, Edifices and Ornaments of Pompeii, the Result of Excavations since 1819,74 and by the publication of Bulwer-Lytton’s The Last Days of Pompeii in 1834.75 Romantic archaeology provides proximity to history and its imaginative reconstruction; Bucke writes of Herculaneum:

Looking round upon the long ruined city, who would not, for the moment, utterly forget the seventeen centuries that had revolved since Herculaneum and Pompeii were part and parcel of the world, moving to and fro along its streets!76

The archaeological impulse of Bulwer-Lytton is to repopulate these ruins: “to reanimate the bones which were yet spared to his survey; to traverse the gulf of eighteen centuries, and to wake to a second existence—the City of the Dead!”77 The excavation of ruins provides the material for The Last Days of Pompeii; the final section of the novel explains how the details of its characters were taken from descriptions of the jewellery, costumes and

69 Disraeli, Benjamin Disraeli Letters, 1:168.
74 William Gell, Pompeiana: The Topography, Edifices and Ornaments of Pompeii, the Result of Excavations since 1819 (London: Jennings & Chaplin, 1832).
75 Alroy was composed contemporaneously with The Last Days of Pompeii, but Disraeli admitted in 1834 that he had not read Bulwer-Lytton’s novel at this time (Benjamin Disraeli Letters, 1:430).
76 Bucke, Ruins of Ancient Cities, 1:336.
location of the preserved corpses that were discovered. Such literature pursues the warm life of the past that the ruin invokes. Bucke wrote of a visit to Herculaneum that “there would be a sense of the actual presence of those past times, almost like the illusion of a dream.” His description of a scene excavated at Herculaneum, of a woman found preserved in the molten lava, also conveys this proximity: “This cement, compressed and hardened by time around her body, has become a complete mould of it, and in the pieces here preserved, we see a perfect impression of the different parts to which it adhered.” The use of the present perfect (“has become a mould”) rather than the preterite tense for completed events, attests to the continuity of the past into the present which the sudden capture of history in statuary makes so vivid: the frozen shapes “concur in revealing to us that this woman was young; that she was tall and well made, and even that she had escaped in her chemise, for some of the linen was still adhering to the ashes.”

The stimulus for presenting a tale of historic Pompeii may have been the excavations of that city and Herculaneum, but the medium for rendering this reanimate life for Bulwer-Lytton is language, and he devotes a large portion of the Introduction of The Last Days of Pompeii to this subject. He aspires to write “Prose Fiction” which has absorbed the capacities of other literary forms and “does not bow the creative to the scholastic,” while still serving the task of historical representation. Historical accuracy might question how similar this “second existence” is to its original one; and “accurate” might be a more fitting term than “scholastic.” The romances of both Bulwer-Lytton and Disraeli simulate a past that is more governed by the desire for a lively narrative than by historical accuracy—in Bulwer-Lytton’s novel this is a historical fiction; in Alroy, with its alteration in the past that inflects the present, it should be seen as alternate-historical. Disraeli’s simulation of the past has its analogue in a Victorian archaeological practice that Virginia Zimmerman records, that of reburying objects so that tourists to sites such as Pompeii could “discover” them. The crucial difference between Bulwer-Lytton’s and Disraeli’s historical method can also be understood through the metaphor of excavation. The former gives imaginative life to the physical artefacts of Pompeii and

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78 Bulwer-Lytton describes the scene that inspired the events in his novel: “In the garden was found a skeleton with a key by its bony hand, and near it a bag of coins. This is believed to have been the master of the house—the unfortunate Diomed, who had probably sought to escape by the garden, and been destroyed either by the vapors or some fragment of stone” (The Last Days of Pompeii, 387).
79 Bucke, Ruins of Ancient Cities, 1:336.
80 Bucke, Ruins of Ancient Cities, 1:348.
81 Bucke, Ruins of Ancient Cities, 1:348.
82 Bulwer-Lytton, The Last Days of Pompeii, 10, 11.
83 Nonetheless, Zimmerman reports that even into the twentieth century, Bulwer-Lytton’s novel was described as the best available guidebook for travellers to the site (Excavating Victorians, illustrated edition. (State University of New York Press, 2007), 113.
84 Zimmerman, Excavating Victorians, 106.
Herculaneum’s ashen traces—which, it should be said, were already in widespread circulation (the subject of magic lantern shows, paintings, and of Felicia Hemans’ poem “The Image in Lava” (1828)). Disraeli, however, is manufacturing his own artefact, one which is textual rather than physical. The production of a style that pre-dates and anticipates Britain’s literary canon is a means of burying an object in historical time, and Disraeli’s motivation for doing so is to manufacture a political inheritance, to be recovered by “some poet [...] within whose veins our sacred blood may flow.” Anachronism becomes a technique of fiction whose purpose is to obscure fictionality: the contemporary is pushed back into the past, whether as an archaeological object or as an apocryphal history, and dressed in a synthetic literary style that, like the red dust of previous cultures, seems to indicate authenticity. The object then acquires an indeterminate status in relation to the truth, just as Disraeli wished for his novels to operate in an an uncertain space between fiction, romance and history. The alternate history can only operate in the romantic-utopian mode when there is an element of doubt as to whether it is a true or fictional history, and it remains conceivable that an invented character may be a more truthful representative of a former age than an assiduously chronicled historical figure.

Charles Renouvier: Editing History

EXCUSEZ LES FAUTES DE L’AUTEUR. 85

This apology begins the Editor’s Postscript to Uchronie (1876), a work which details an imaginary history of Europe from the first to the eight centuries of our timeline—but which are the eighth to the sixteenth centuries in the imaginary (uchronic) timeline, dated according to the Olympian calendar. An English translation of the work’s title would be: Uchronia (Utopia in History): An Apocryphal Historical Sketch of the Development of European Civilization, Not as it Was, But as it Might Have Been. The central alteration in Uchronie is that the Christian church was not permitted to gain an ascendancy over other religions within the Roman empire, nor did it ever acquire political power or exercise its influence to initiate conflicts over doctrinal disputes, or wars between religions. The history of western civilization remains predominantly secular, and cultural development and political advances (civic rights and freedoms) occur earlier than in our actual history. The complexity of Uchronie is reflected in its editorial apparatus that records the text’s own apocryphal passage through history. As well as the five “Tableaus” of alternate-historical narrative (which constitute Uchronie itself), there is a Forward written by a modern-day editor (whom we take to be Renouvier), followed by an

85 Renouvier, Uchronie, 412. All translations from this work (and its reviews in French-language journals) are my own.
“untitled Appendix by an author of the seventeenth century to serve as preface”; this section of the work tells the story of the composition of the *Uchronie* by a monk, Father Antapire, who passed on his heretical history to the father of the unnamed commentator before dying in 1601 at the hands of the Inquisition. There is also a second Appendix, written, we are told, in 1658 by the son of the author of the first Appendix (thus the third recipient and guardian of the document); then a third part of the Appendix, added in 1709 by the grandson, who considers the last hundred years of actual history in light of the thoughts on civil society contained in *Uchronie*. The Editor’s Postscript (this final editorial voice is identified as Renouvier’s) examines the logical paradoxes of such counterfactual narratives, in particular how they privilege one particular historical moment with contingency, and assume the resultant trajectory to be deterministically ordained. He does, however, suggest that this exercise might disrupt our acceptance of historical fatalism, and might even be “a useful book.” By disclosing that Father Antapire is a “doubly apocryphal storyteller, who does not exist,” Renouvier collapses the multiple identities of the collated fragments’ authors, extending to the editor an identity which is indistinct and multi-faceted, as was the case in *Alroy*. The Postscript closes the novel, and it is ambiguous whether the signature of “Ch. Renouvier” refers to authorship of the Postscript only or the entirety of *Uchronie*—in which case the apology is one he makes on his own behalf.

The detailed, exhaustive and (in tone and reflection) philosophical imaginary history of Europe make *Uchronie* a work that contrasts with the style and genre of *Alroy*. Its first Tableau adheres to actual history, from which it departs in the second, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius in the second century AD (in our timeline). *Uchronie* records lines of succession, governmental policy and crises which emerge—such as the attempted invasion of a secular Roman republic by Germany in the fourth century AD, supported by Christian factions. The text describes heretical dogmas that arise within the church, various national or racial characteristics, and also advances in Science, culture, and the political structures and legal systems of different European countries. The presentation of altered history is accompanied by editorial footnotes, which reflect on both the departures from received events and on the process of writing an imaginary historical narrative. Here, the editor comments on the hypothetical modernity from which the fictional history is delivered:

> Of this uchronic world, of course, it is with great difficulty that we glimpse this modernity in a distant future, we men of the nineteenth century; the middle ages which, for the author, was the time of struggle between the principles of

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86 In a neat coincidence for this chapter, Benjamin Disraeli also refers to the persecution inflicted upon his forefathers by the Inquisition. Disraeli, “Introduction,” viii.

87 Renouvier, *Uchronie*, 412.
tolerance and theocracy, was instead the period of the triumph and dominance of a church and a priesthood.  

These multiple perspectives upon the text, supposedly added over the course of centuries, have a similarly disorienting effect to the two calendars that the reader has to negotiate. In both cases, a complexity results from the way that the book serves as a witness to long passages of imaginary history, while being read in our own: the explanatory footnotes and the framing Prefaces, multi-part Appendix and Postscript are attributed to three generations of editors, so the text arrives before us with all the indications of authentic historical descent. The chronology adheres to the Olympian calendar, and the text’s detailed historical narrative leads up to the sixteenth century of the Olympiades, corresponding to the eighth century of the Christian era. This 800-year differential complicates the reading of the text, for ‘known’ events are dated according to the uchronic calendar—and furthermore, the effect of Europe’s alternate development is that events we recognise happen earlier than in our own timeline. This divergence between the two chronologies provides a numerical count for Renouvier’s alternate-historical argument: unhindered by religion, advances in science and democratic politics take place much sooner, and the dates of recognisable waypoints of historical progress dated in the Olympian calendar begin to approximate to the same dates that we know from the Christian calendar. In an editorial footnote, Renouvier comments that Father Antapire’s presentation of the sixteenth century in the uchronic timeline (eighth century AD) “portrays a scene that roughly resembles the condition of republics from the middle ages.” In other words, as a result of separating religion and politics, this imaginary history gains several centuries of advance on our own. A review of a 1901 edition of Uchronie summarises the outcome of this historical alteration thus: Europe “seems to have caught up with, by the ninth century, the intellectual and moral condition of our modern civilization.”

The text has attracted very little critical interest in recent decades; Renouvier himself, despite having been an influential and immensely prolific philosopher and journal editor, is barely remembered. William Logue, a virtually lone scholar of Renouvier’s philosophy, attributes this neglect to a tendency post 1871 to overlook French disciples of Kant, the eclipse of philosophical pragmatism, the decline of liberalism after World War I, as well as the concentration in political philosophy of the latter twentieth century on the origins of socialism.

88 Renouvier, Uchronie, 32.
89 Renouvier, Uchronie, 283n. It is in fact more than eight centuries of advance, for Renouvier points out that the alternate eighth century enjoys a level of emancipation in the arts and sciences that are still not achieved in the nineteenth century.
and fascism. Renouvier’s disappearance from Philosophy syllabuses could not have been anticipated at the time of his death, when he was named alongside Europe’s most celebrated thinkers. Uchronie is barely mentioned in Logue’s full-length work, which is surprising as his book includes a long section on Renouvier’s resistance to historical determinism, and separate chapters on “The Philosophical Defense of Liberty” and “The Religious Crisis in the Nineteenth Century,” two subjects to which Uchronie has a particular relevance and which its altered historical narrative directly addresses. In-depth treatment of the texts is also lacking among critics who write on the subject of alternate history: Paul Alkon borrows the term “Uchronia” from Renouvier for a chapter title in his work on the Origins of Futuristic Fiction, but provides no detailed examination of the work. It is not cited in any article yet published by Catherine Gallagher, despite its unequivocal location in the alternate history category (though perhaps because it is not an alternate-historical novel or short story), and likewise fails to appear in Darko Suvin’s survey of “The Rise of the Alternative History Sub-Genre.” It is, however, listed in Hacker and Chamberlain’s “Revised Bibliography of Alternative History.” The date of its discussion in an article on “Contingency in History”—1959—only reflects the way that Renouvier has faded from more recent scholarly attention. This neglect of Uchronie may be a result of its considerable length (over 400 pages) and the fact, as may be inferred, that it is a laborious read. It is, nonetheless, a significant instance of counterfactual thought in the nineteenth century; Renouvier considers the historical processes that might produce the most democratic form of society, rails against the Enlightenment’s legacy of determinism and the subsequent narrative of historical progress that it implies, and cautiously suggests that the imagination of altered history—despite the errors it produces—might serve to free us from our assumptions about history and society.

Liberty in History: Against Determinism

The departure from received history occurs during the reign of Marcus Aurelius in the second century AD, with the determination to suppress the growing influence of polytheistic and monotheistic religions upon civic life. With the Roman Empire in decline and political corruption firmly entrenched, religion comes to operate in a fallen world, and in the cities especially exerts an influence over the lives of the fearful and hopeful in the form of

92 Logue, Charles Renouvier, S.
94 Hacker and Chamberlain, “Pasts that Might Have Been, II: A Revised Bibliography of Alternative History.”
superstitions and “execrable sacrifices.” Its spiritual content diminishes but, equally, can be made to serve the cause of the new political leaders: “Spiritual and ascetic religion flees into the desert, peoples the caverns of saints, and dresses itself, with the respect of all, in the feigned or sincere veneration of the princes themselves.” Christianity then establishes itself as an adjunct to sovereign power by occupying the abandoned place of republican virtues, for by making the sacrificial figure of Christ the representative of a religion, it acquires the power to proselytise to the idea of a generalised people that had only become intelligible in the Roman republic. When Renouvier describes the qualities needed to negotiate these political challenges, he speaks for all historical periods: “If this politics is conducted wisely and with clarity, it will work with the philosophers for the education of public reason, for the improvement of institutions and power, for its correct transformation.” The point of departure is the decision of Marcus Aurelius to accept the advice of Avidius Cassius to establish a 25-year dictatorship in order to restore the empire to the principles of the first republic. Marcus Aurelius takes Avidius Cassius as his adoptive son (rather than passing on the succession to Commodus) and they rule together until the dignified suicide of the former, leaving behind a document containing advice for Avidius Cassius, his designated successor. Here, Marcus Aurelius asks how the restored republic can survive among the forces which threaten it: “How to think, how to resolve, between these desolate alternatives in which, however we look at them, we are lost among the contradictions of a human nature that lives and dies in its struggles?” The history we know, with its conflicts and violence, is always waiting to reassert itself, and the second Tableau closes with its apparent reinstatement: Avidius Cassius is murdered, and Commodus is declared emperor by the senate, and immediately nullifies all the the progressive legislation of his father. 2,000 Christians are murdered and mystical ceremonies return to public life.

The promise of progress and the return to the republic have been implanted however, and the reign of Commodus is also cut short, whereupon the benefits of secular rule and the legal protection of freedoms produces incremental benefits that lead to the social and political advance already referred to. The alternate-historical format makes it possible to present an argument for the long-durational, rather than evental character of historical development. Despite the divergence of the two timelines, and the achievement of historical advance, the same forces and crises affect the alternate history as our own. In this sense it is a very different historical landscape than the exaggerated and ironic utopia of Napoléon Apocryphe. The

96 Renouvier, Uchronie, 46.
97 Renouvier, Uchronie, 46.
98 Renouvier, Uchronie, 55ff.
99 Renouvier, Uchronie, 60.
100 Renouvier, Uchronie, 96–97.
advent of free trade between nations is accompanied, at first, by “commercial wars” which “ravaged the entire world.” As in our own timeline, the discovery of new continents in Uchronie is accompanied by terrible atrocities. Ignorance and violent self-interest are always present, which means that cultural progress is perpetually in danger of regression. Barbarian hordes gather on the edges of the Roman empire (supported by the Christian Church) but are more effectively withstood: Rome does not fall. The uchronic implantation of secular rule has better equipped the Roman Republic to deal with the inevitable shocks and crises that attend social and economic development.

Father Antapire’s interpretation of Greek and Roman history discovers civic virtues and principles of liberty in these civilizations, for example the “admirable systems of education destined to elevate each citizen’s vital values [valeur virile].” He also makes it clear that there is a tradition of liberty in the West that predates the Greek city-states; their freedoms were not new, but were rather the formalisation of liberties that originated in their forms of community prior to organisation into city-states. “Villages precede empires and freedom is older than enslavement,” the author writes. Furthermore, humanity is bound to repeat conflicts so long as the liberty of others is not respected. These observations may seem fairly innocuous, but they signify an interpretation of history (which has not yet diverged from actual history) that revises received accounts of the past. Father Antapire reads the fall of Rome not as process of a decline into decadence and corruption, but as the result of the curtailment of certain liberties that accompanied imperial expansion. These included the failure to maintain structures of citizenship, the impossibility of continuing to give land freely to citizens, and the concentration of power in order to administer the expanded empire. At this point Rome had converted to a system which, though still called a republic, was essentially monarchical. Uchronie, then, participates in the revision of the historical understanding of the fall of the Roman Empire. The context for this valorisation of the past by Renouvier’s fictional historian is to resist a historiographical subordination of later history to the achievements of the past in order to affirm the long trajectory of human amelioration.

As Logue has pointed out, a tenet of the deterministic historical philosophy of the Enlightenment is the need “to consider classical antiquity—thought, religion, and society—inferior to the European Middle Ages.” This optimistic belief in the ongoing improvement of human societies was one that Renouvier resisted throughout his life, and the alternate-

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101 Renouvier, Uchronie, 281.
102 Renouvier, Uchronie, 275.
103 Renouvier, Uchronie, 22.
104 Renouvier, Uchronie, 24.
105 Renouvier, Uchronie, 29.
106 Logue, Charles Renouvier, 107.
historical format provides a novel way of presenting an argument for an anti-deterministic philosophy of history. The Preface to *Uchronie* describes the conundrum that afflicts nineteenth-century historians, from which he wishes to propose an escape: History is a discipline that draws on the successful model of scientific disciplines; as such, a portion of historical enquiry is devoted to finding the “necessary laws” which govern behaviour and events, and thus arrives at an erroneous understanding of human action as “determined by its precedents, and all these events written in advance in who knows what eternal decrees.”

The legacy from the Enlightenment is this positivist, scientific model for enquiry in the fields of History, Philosophy and Art. There is a problem, however, for this post-Enlightenment historiography; it is obliged to affirm as necessary and dignified (through their necessary part in historical development) those institutions which it wishes to go beyond—not to mention the problem of explaining how change occurs, and the failure of these systematic historians to apply their laws of necessity to the accurate prediction of future events. By proposing that liberty and civic life found admirable expression in these much earlier civilizations and cultures, Renouvier is providing a serious reinterpretation of the history of European civilization, whereas Whately’s contrarian thesis of Napoleon’s non-existence did so ironically. Unlike *Alroy*, Renouvier’s expository material does not involve historical alterations, nor stylistic expression.

*Uchronie* is certainly antagonistic toward the influence of religion upon politics and public life. Renouvier campaigned and argued for secular and republican education for all classes of society, and shortly after the revolution of 1848 wrote a textbook affirming secular principles of citizenship and civics for use in schools; the work, *Manuel Républicain de l’Homme et du Citoyen*, was vigorously attacked in the Chamber and subjected to a vote of no confidence, which it lost. Renouvier (as well as his supervisor, the minister for Education) was forced to resign. The many reasons for Renouvier’s anti-clericalism should not, however, obscure his broader argument about the need for organic and gradual historical development as the most effective safeguard of liberty; this argument has a pressing application to the context of late-nineteenth-century politics in France, after a turbulent period in which another French republic had ceded to another empire under the rule of another Napoleon, suffered a war with Prussia and experienced the suppression of the Paris Commune. Renouvier’s engagement with contemporary affairs is apparent in his relationship with Louis Ménard, whom he had met in late 1852 and who remained a close friend and ally, differences of

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opinion notwithstanding. He was also a fellow-exile, having removed himself from France between 1849 and 1852 to avoid political persecution. Both turned away from involvement in politics during the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte, but both transferred their advocacy of progressive politics to their areas of study: analytic philosophy for Renouvier, and the study of Hellenic culture for Ménard. Renouvier and Ménard share an admiration for the polytheism of Greek civilization and consider ancient Greece to be a high-water mark of philosophical humanism in western civilization, an opposing view to optimistic interpretations of history as ongoing though erratic progress.111

The first letters of their correspondence published in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* date from 1874 to 1875 and consist of a disagreement over the value of the recently terminated Paris Commune, and the violent manner of its suppression.112 In the first of these letters, Renouvier responds to a recently published article by Ménard (on the uses of fine art), in which he advocates amnesty for the communards;113 Renouvier declares himself “aussi communard que vous [as much a communard as yourself],” but in a letter of February 1875 he expresses his distaste for the idea of a government made up of the communards.114 This provokes an angry response from Ménard, who replies that Renouvier’s wishes have indeed been realised, and that France now has a government of the left, one which is prepared to execute its own constituents and send Louis Auguste Blanqui to a prison cell. (Blanqui was imprisoned by the Thiers government in 1871, days before the insurrection.) There is a strong sense, in Ménard’s letter, of history’s paradoxes: he predicts ironically that when society is finally “saved,” “it will be declared necessary to break with the revolutionary elements and that the Commune can only be properly led by those who spent their lives fighting it.” He then laments humanity’s apparent historical fate, by which “we will thus always turn in the same circles like a squirrel in its cage.”115

Both deplore the transformation of organised religion, in particular by the Catholic Church, into a vessel of temporal power. The editor of these letters, M. H. Peyre, claims that they also were critical of a conventional belief in progress—for the vices of toleration of laziness and the exclusion of free will that they associated with it.116 As mentioned, Renouvier

113 I am not going to hypothesise here that the Commune, like Napoleon, was a historical drama that motivated the publication of alternate histories; that claim can be made with more substance in relation to Blanqui’s *L’éternité par les astres*, which I discuss in the next chapter. By macabre coincidence, Blanqui was struck down by a heart attack in 1881 immediately after giving a speech in which he argued for the communards’ forgiveness.
114 Peyre, Renouvier, and Ménard, “Correspondence indédite de Renouvier et de Louis Ménard,” 5.
116 Peyre, Renouvier, and Ménard, “Correspondence indédite de Renouvier et de Louis Ménard,” 2.
is clearly an opponent of an automatic belief in progress, as if social advance would take care of itself. He castigates “those who believe that the best means of advancing is to find that all is well and could not fail to go well, whatever happens.” But, perhaps surprisingly in light of *Uchronie*’s admiration for Greek and Roman civilization, he goes on to deny the existence of an exemplary era of past history:

My ‘reflections’ in general return to this— that I do not see in the past which period of sufficient duration one could cite that would put our supposed decadence to shame; that we live in a time that is analogous to that of the wars of religion, and that the loss of ancient habits, combined with passions that can no longer be restrained, produces, as always in these cases, an accumulation of crimes, without the human heart having declined; and even that among us there are a significant group of men whose moral ideals are higher than those of any former Christian period.

Renouvier appears to be perturbed by the idea of history as a series of violent and disorderly phases—the same sort of dumb circularity that Ménard referred to in the image of the caged squirrel. It is clear that despite their scepticism toward progress as an inevitable historical force, both share a belief in the *possibility* of progress: Ménard supports the political project of which the Commune was part, and Renouvier wishes to imagine a society in which civic development is entrusted to the care of a "significant group of men.”

To concentrate on Renouvier’s antipathy toward the (Catholic) Church and his admiration of Hellenic society is to overlook the model of historical development that he desires for western society, and the disagreement with Ménard over the Commune brings this to light. In the same letters as quoted above, he defends the stance of *Critique Philosophique* (the weekly journal which he edited), which favoured the rule of law over and above the self-rule of the communards. “The thesis of legalism that we defend in the *Critique*, and which no doubt displeases you, has its philosophical basis in the need to refashion [refaire] for the nation habits to sustain her, unless we wish for her to perish through the reiteration [renouvellement] of her crimes.” We can infer that what Renouvier finds alarming in the politics of the communards (and in France’s revolutionary political tradition) is the violence of their rupture from an organic, but not automatic, historical development; for Renouvier these violent breaks from tradition will only reproduce the type of history that Ménard deplores: turning in circles like a dumb animal.

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117 Peyre, Renouvier, and Ménard, “Correspondence indédite de Renouvier et de Louis Ménard,” 7.
118 Peyre, Renouvier, and Ménard, “Correspondence indédite de Renouvier et de Louis Ménard,” 7–8.
119 This phrase and aspiration will return in the utopian imagination of H. G. Wells.
120 Peyre, Renouvier, and Ménard, “Correspondence indédite de Renouvier et de Louis Ménard,” 8.
The value that Renouvier identifies in habits ("habitudes," which could also be translated as "customs") reveals the organic, developmental character that Renouvier makes a condition for a healthy society; this brings us back to the “loss of ancient habits” in the indented quotation above and reveals that it is not only the secularism of antique societies to which Renouvier attaches importance, but their continuity and a gradual nature of political and social transformations across time and history. Renouvier underscores the importance of gradualism in the same letter when he writes that “on its own, the loss of habits, be they social, religious or political, must necessarily lead to the most lamentable consequences.”

This model of development seems to have been overlooked by Uchronie’s contemporary commentators, perhaps obscured by the more overt contemporary engagements that Renouvier makes on the subject of religion. How then to reconcile Renouvier’s manifest scepticism toward the idea of progress as a historical given with his affirmation of the organic development of society? The answer is that the latter requires hard work and ongoing critical vigilance, implying a defence of organic political development that is opposed to departures from incremental historical development.

We should consider the unexpected dissonance that this principle introduces into the format of alternate history and also the concept of utopia, which Renouvier has included in the second part of Uchronie’s title. Utopia—understood as the best society we can hope for—comes to mean something like Whig history; except whereas Whig history presents a justification of history that has happened (in England, a narrative of a more or less steady advance of progress and civic liberties), Renouvier places this Whig ideal into the alternate-historical realm, and rather than introducing a sudden departure from received history as the premise of his apocryphal sketch, he imagines the principles of the Roman republic to have been more resilient to those who wished to replace them with imperial politics and religious cultism. The historical alteration is thus extremely minor, but the consequence in Uchronie is an improved society, but which becomes thinkable as the one which ought to have developed from Greek and Roman civic ideals, and with which we can still align ourselves. This development that ought to have happened is not quite the ‘natural’ order of development, but is nonetheless the one that vigilant exercise of reason would have produced. These values are referred to as the necessary attributes for social development at key moments in Uchronie: “If this politics is conducted wisely and with clarity, it will work with the philosophers for the education of public reason, for the improvement of institutions and power, for its correct transformation.”

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121 Peyre, Renouvier, and Ménard, “Correspondence indédite de Renouvier et de Louis Ménard,” 8.
122 Renouvier, Uchronie, 60.
Renouvier is astute enough to recognise that this deferral to reason begs a question by assuming that the values of the Roman Republic somehow remain accessible. They are thus placed above historical contexts, which they can traverse. This is a point he expands on in his Introduction à la philosophie analytique de l’histoire: Les idées, les religions, les systèmes, and which seems to have informed the ideas in Uchronie. This Introduction was published in 1896 but, like Uchronie, is an expansion of earlier ideas (being an amplification of the fourth of his Essais de critique général (1864)). In the “Recapitulation” of this work, he isolates two historiographical puzzles: 1. whether morality exists independently of its application in historical time, and 2. whether humanity is governed by a law of progress, deriving from its faculty for moral judgement (“conscience”). His answer to the former is ambiguous, for although he does identify moral judgement as an ideal that is removed from the series of historical events, his explanation of that judgement folds back into a conception of history: “Thought judges, corrects, refashions, reconsider without cease individual and social judgements, acts, events, in a word history.” The conclusion then is that morality does seem to be “a function of history”; that is, it cannot be understood as an ideal that traverses history without alteration. But likewise, we cannot examine or judge history without recourse to principles that we suppose to be universal.

Renouvier responds to the second question, of inevitable social advancement deriving from human moral faculties, by claiming that no historical period has believed so insistently in progress as the current one. Despite his antagonism to determinism, he characterises this belief as “a source of force, a motive for change and improvement, a principle of liberation from the past, from its errors and crimes.” He criticises thinkers who have violently misrepresented the complexity of historical forces by reducing them to deterministic systems, naming Hegel, Comte, Bossuet and Vico—all of whom are said to have described history as governed by a law or pattern of development. The harm caused by such systems is the abandonment of responsibility and agency—and extends to the great minds of the nineteenth century; Renouvier’s second study of Victor Hugo (in a section titled “Optimism. Utopia. Eschatology”) deplores “this imbecilic dogmatism, which entered little by little into all heads, [and] exercised a deplorable influence upon the ideas and works of Victor Hugo.” Renouvier is most critical of the intellectual laziness that such fatalism inculcates: “there is nothing so

123 Charles Renouvier, Introduction à la philosophie analytique de l’histoire: Les idées, les religions, les systèmes (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1896), 550. Translations from this work are my own.
124 Renouvier, Introduction À La Philosophie Analytique De L’histoire, 551. The description of Renouvier’s philosophy as “neo-Kantian” is especially clear here.
125 Renouvier, Introduction À La Philosophie Analytique De L’histoire, 552.
126 Renouvier, Introduction À La Philosophie Analytique De L’histoire, 552–53.
127 Renouvier, Introduction À La Philosophie Analytique De L’histoire, 550. (emph)
128 Charles Renouvier, Victor Hugo le philosophe (Paris: Armand Colin, 1921), 139.
easeful for the human spirit as to acknowledge established facts, nothing so difficult as to comprehend and disentangle the immensity of what might have been.” Renouvier is confronted, I believe, by a problem. In rejecting historical determinism we become aware of the “immensity” of all that history might have produced; but *Uchronie*, as I have claimed above, implies an organic course of historical development that *would have taken place* if the influence of religion could have been constrained and of that of philosophical reason elevated. Has Renouvier replaced one determinism with another that he finds more desirable? To his credit, he confronts these logical problems in his Editor’s Postscript to *Uchronie*. The elaborately hedged structure of the text should be recognised as the means by which Renouvier was able to isolate his imagination of a desirable, more secular society by identifying it as a discovered text; he is then able to express the reservations of a philosopher by standing as the text’s putative editor and commentator. It is this caution and scepticism that make *Uchronie* a critical-reflexive text that adopts a circumspect approach to its own historical desires.

**Liberty in Thought: Unthinking Dogmatism**

The “faults” that Renouvier apologises for in his Postscript to *Uchronie* (“EXCUSEZ LES FAUTES DE L’AUTEUR”) should be understood as an awareness of the fallacies and contradictions that arise from projecting desires and convictions into a counterfactual historical scenario. “No one could know better than we the difficulties of an imaginary construction such as the one which is the subject of *Uchronie,*” he writes. He lists the manifest faults of the alternate-historical undertaking: its failure to reflect the infinite variety of life, its dubious presentation, the poverty of its invented facts; he points out that even historians of the real world are unable to persuade their critics of their arguments. He inserts a diagram to illustrate the logical stumbling-block of counterfactual histories (fig. 2). Having proposed that the historical trajectory *Oa* be imagined otherwise (as *OA*), why should a reader be convinced of the alternative history, *OAb*, and not imagine alternatives of his or her own that begin *OAB* (and so on)? The “uchroniste,” Renouvier remarks, is obliged to make decisions that are “multiplying, arbitrary, unverifiable.”

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This hedged, self-critical presentation was the only way that Renouvier thought appropriate to republish the alternate history that he began 25 years earlier, but this further layer to the apocryphal narrative also has the effect of expanding the subject of the text—from an extended attack upon the temporal power of the Church to a disquisition on historical knowledge and the value of counterfactual thinking, of recognising the contingency of historical events in order to avoid the “imbecilic dogmatism” of historical determinism; and replaces dogmatism is doubt. Like Geoffroy-Château, Renouvier has subjected a set of historical ideals to their “realisation” through cartographical representation in the alternate history format, and has discovered inconsistencies in the process of the exercise—in particular, the problem of replacing one determinism with another. For Geoffroy-Château, the difficulties of thinking counterfactually were expressed in hyperbole, absurdity, and the sinister disappearance of political concepts. Renouvier speaks more directly from his editorial position, and stresses the logical paradoxes that necessarily adhere to such thought experiments.

Despite the problems associated with counterfactual thinking, the exercise is nonetheless valuable, for it reclaims “the right to introduce into the actual series of facts of history a certain number of different outcomes [déterminations] than those which were produced. In choosing these well, one can demonstrate the probability that the course of events could have been profoundly different.”

This seems to be the same intention that Alkon identifies in the text: “Renouvier’s main object as philosopher and historian was to

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133 Renouvier, *Uchronie*, 411.
employ uchronia as a means of speculating on lines of historical causation.”\textsuperscript{134} We can, however, say more about the operation by emphasising the importance of scepticism. The value does not lie in any production of positive knowledge about historical processes and causation; rather it is in “the right to introduce” historical concepts and outcomes in order to disrupt a belief in determinism. And this in turn serves the needs of the present, when the interests of society will require an interpretation—we might say the excavation—of history for the concepts and values that are required now. Of the experiment, Renouvier writes:

Maybe it will make us think. It at least gives notice to new supporters, serious and unresolved perhaps, of human liberty, achieved in the past as it formed and which it might not have formed, and pregnant with an immense future, in which its affirmation must be the principal object.\textsuperscript{135}

This determination to think otherwise coincides with Foucault’s project of making the study of history an exercise in dismantling historical assumptions: “to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.”\textsuperscript{136} Certainly, in Renouvier’s ethico-critical ideal, the rational spirit that will best protect the cultural achievement of past societies is expressed in terms that recall Foucault: this “thought [that] judges, corrects, refashions without cease individual and social judgements, acts, events, in a word history.”\textsuperscript{137} Alternate history is the format Renouvier chooses to perform this exercise in freeing thought from prevailing historiographical assumptions, through “the comparison of what might have been with what happened in truth.”\textsuperscript{138} Renouvier hopes that if this is the result of the book, then the author “would have achieved, even if chimerical and defective in presentation, a useful book.”\textsuperscript{139}

With Alroy, Disraeli was also endeavouring to write a useful book, but one whose application is intended to be upon his own life as a literary and political figure. For both, the realisation of a desirable future depends upon the malleability of the past, that is to say its susceptibility to reconfiguration and arrangement. By taking revisionism outside of the processes of analysis, emphasis and interpretation, and into the alternate-historical realm where counterfactual scenarios are covertly or explicitly posited, these two texts cannot sidestep engagement with prevailing historiographical norms, for historical rearrangements must always take place within structures of historical interpretation. The local context upon which Disraeli’s novel (whether as serious proposal or whimsical thought experiment) seeks to

\textsuperscript{134} Alkon, \textit{Origins of Futuristic Fiction}, 116.
\textsuperscript{135} Renouvier, \textit{Uchronie}, xiv.
\textsuperscript{136} Foucault, \textit{The Care of the Self}, 9.
\textsuperscript{137} Renouvier, \textit{Introduction À La Philosophie Analytique De L’histoire}, 551.
\textsuperscript{138} Renouvier, \textit{Uchronie}, 292.
\textsuperscript{139} Renouvier, \textit{Uchronie}, 412.
gain traction is that of British politics in the mid-nineteenth century and his own role in it. This ‘practical’ application of an alternate-history whose model is romantic-utopian reminds us that such desires to recuperate past possibilities are subtended by an understanding of the present as substantive, even though the past may be drawn upon and inherited in different ways through the agency of individual novelists and philosophers. Renouvier’s critical-reflexive alternate history belongs to a different type of project altogether, for its consequence is to render the past unreal—in the sense of being contingent and veiled in assumptions that we would now describe as ideological. The alternate past takes on another significance in this framework: it does not contain promises or legacies that are harboured in the present like blood lineage, but rather serves as a reflexive space that makes possible the unveiling of the synthetic naturalism of historical assumptions.
Chapter 4
Alternate Earths: Philosophical Romance to Materialist History

Introduction: (Bat)Men on the Moon

Fig. 3: Unsigned, “Ruby Amphitheater” (1835).

In August 1835, the New York Sun published a serialised account of John Herschel’s lunar discoveries, supposedly written by his assistant, “Dr. Andrew Grant,” but which was an invention of the journalist Richard Adams Locke. Herschel the younger had, according to the article, developed “a telescope of vast dimensions and an entirely new principle” which allowed him to examine the moon at previously unknown magnification. Through this telescope, the account continued, he was able to observe flora and fauna in tremendous detail, including the behaviour of human-like though unrefined creatures: “We scientifically denominated them as Vespertilio-homo, or man-bat; and they are doubtless innocent and happy creatures, notwithstanding that some of their amusements would but ill comport with our terrestrial notions of decorum.” Subsequent observations revealed architecture, evidence

1 Richard Adams Locke, The Moon Hoax: Or, A Discovery that the Moon Has a Vast Population of Human Beings (New York: William Gowans, 1859), 8. This text is a reprint of the series of articles from the New York Sun.
2 Locke, The Moon Hoax, 38.
of civilization and even religion, whose mysterious representations invited interpretation and conjecture:

Had the devotees of these temples gone the way of all living, or were the latter merely historical monuments? What did the ingenious builders mean by the globe surrounded by flames? Did they by this record any past calamity of their world, or predict any future one of ours?[^4]

Michael J. Crowe identifies the six *New York Sun* articles, known as the Great Moon Hoax (and republished by Locke as such), as more an instance of satire than a hoax to alarm the credulous.[^3] They certainly parody important aspects of the plurality-of-worlds debate in the nineteenth century; there is the issue of scopic power and with it the expectation that a new generation of telescope would reveal new levels of visual detail, perhaps providing evidence of civilization and history on other planets. The want of “decorum” among the bat-men, here alarming a fastidious and imaginary astronomer for comic effect, reflects anxieties elsewhere about the propriety of even imagining alternate forms of life on other planets—a problem that intensified as one considered the possibility of human-like Beings and their higher faculties. The lunar monuments described demonstrate not only culture and intelligence, but also, the apocryphal author speculates, an awareness of future terrestrial history. The author’s uncertainty as to whether the enflamed globe represents another world’s past or Earth’s future not only suggests that different celestial bodies may possess variations of a common history, but also untethers celestial history from a single chronological sequence: either these lunar Beings have the gift of prophecy, or the entire history of human civilization (with an implied apocalyptic ending) has in some sense already happened. The idea of a plurality of worlds is not, in itself, one that automatically produces alternate histories—much pluralistic fancy involves the imagination of entirely different species. A notion that recurs in writings by the exponents of pluralism, however, is of human counterparts in space with similar histories, perhaps with variant versions of our past and future—at which point pluralist conjectures take on an alternate-historical character. This chapter will seek to explain the appearance of cosmic alternate histories late in the century as one of the many flowerings of speculative thought that resulted from the pluralism debate, one which imaginatively projected humans’ past (their history) onto other worlds. My treatment of the debate and its history across the nineteenth century will enable its identification as a formative context for the alternate histories that inherited its terms, but I do not set out to provide a history of the

[^3]: Locke, *The Moon Hoax*, 44.
scientific issues, which have been extensively treated by intellectual historians of the period,\(^5\) nor to discuss the complex divisions of science and religion in the mid-nineteenth century.\(^6\)

My analysis of the topic will identify two tendencies of pluralism which help explain the emergence of alternate history in this field of knowledge and speculation. The first is the underacknowledged historiographical dimension of the debate; the contemplation of other worlds’ heterogeneous histories was always recognised as problematic for a theologically orthodox cosmogony, according to which Earth enjoys the creator’s special care and a privileged and singular history framed as a narrative of creation, redemption and eventual salvation. The implications of multiple planetary histories for Christian orthodoxy are taken up in the alternate-historical cosmologies that I examine. The second tendency is governed by the understanding of information as light: the application of spectral analysis to celestial bodies led to an understanding of their colour spectrum as the signature of their chemical composition. Also, as telescopes penetrated further and further into space, the recognition that the light of distant stars and nebulae would have travelled for centuries and millennia to reach Earth meant that what we saw of these stars was their history. Any observers of Earth from other planets would likewise be witnessing events from our historical past. This idea of celestial history as deferred by the speed of light—with different phases of human history visible according to distance from Earth—complicated the idea of a single, linear historical time in the universe. It would be taken up in different ways by alternate-historical writers, who added a sense of contingency to this way in which history could be replayed like a familiar film whose ending might turn out to be different. When those variant civilizations are imagined to possess their own optical technologies, by which they are also contemplating us, then plurality takes on a decentring reflexivity toward man’s position in the cosmos, and the alternate histories that appear later in the century either reject or embrace this destabilising conjecture.

The most significant context of the late-century alternate histories conceived as celestial variations of human history is not the condition of astronomical science at the time of their publication, but the controversies that had characterised this particular branch of astronomical knowledge known as the plurality debate throughout the century; the first part of this chapter will survey this debate in order to illuminate the historiographical dimension of the debate, particularly in relation to the interpretation of nebulae, and its turn toward the analysis of light and an interplanetary subjectivity.


There is a trajectory to the debate, one which begins in a period when its participants were animated, in large part, by the difficulties of reconciling the idea of plurality with a Christian cosmology, as seen in Thomas Chalmers’s proscription of the “romance” of such whimsical astronomy in 1817. While citing Chalmers’s anxieties, later pluralist speculations drew upon new scientific ideas and knowledge (such as increased understanding of nebulae, evolutionary theory and geological information about the age of the planet). The engagement of other disciplinary knowledges, notably in popular scientific works such as Robert Chambers’s *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1840), often produced hypotheses about other planets and are found in texts and passages that are often more fanciful than scientific—the type of imagination that Chalmers had warned against. These popular works on plurality draw upon contemporary science and are often situated *within* scientific culture—either as the speculative departures of professional astronomers such as Richard Proctor and Camille Flammarion, or as interludes in serious astronomical works, as seen in the writing of James Nasmyth and James Carpenter. As Crowe helpfully summarises, disagreements about the existence of other, inhabited worlds “consisted of a battle within religion and a battle within science”; it was thus a field of conjecture that was accessible from perspectives outside both religion and science. The variety of methods for approaching plurality allows literary qualities to occupy a place in this area of scientific investigation. Thomas De Quincey, on viewing the Orion Nebula through Lord Rosse’s telescope in 1846 (and seeing the nebula as an image of Milton’s Death), turns to elaborate locution and literary-mythic imagery in order to render the experience. Likewise, the description of imaginary lunar landscapes acquires a celestial form of the sublime when described by the astronomers James Carpenter and James Nasmyth in 1874. There is a pronounced element of whimsy in nineteenth-century writings on plurality that allows us to treat the alternate-historical texts in this chapter not only as literary responses to scientific investigations, but also as a continuation of a literary tradition that was already present in the transmission of Science in that period. I am indebted to the work of Bernard Lightman in affirming the importance of scientific popularisers in the period—a science-writing tradition that aimed at a wider audience and often enjoyed high-volume circulation as a result.

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The trajectory closes, I argue, with the cosmic nihilism that takes the place of theological anxieties in the two alternate histories I examine in most detail: *L’éternité par les astres* (1872) by Louis Auguste Blanqui and *Lumen* (1872) by Camille Flammarion, with reference in passing to the short story “Hands Off” (1881) by Edward Everett Hale. They all incorporate the terms, controversies and historiographical dimension of the plurality debate, but transfer pluralism into different registers of writing; they also illustrate two alternate-historical modes: the critical-reflexive and the linear-chronological, as I discuss in my analysis of the texts. Blanqui’s prison pamphlet projects the idea of perpetual revolution into the stars; Flammarion extends the spiritualist idea of metempsychosis into the cosmos; Hale reaffirms Earth’s privilege of being singularly favoured by the creator, despite the existence of other worlds on which human history might occur differently. The freedom to go beyond scientific questions about the constitution of the universe is not a departure, but a tradition that has characterised the plurality debate in the nineteenth century. Such literary and imaginative excursions became a manner in which serious scientific questions were often communicated, and communicated widely enough to be of significance to a cultural study of Victorian astronomical thought.

The final section of this chapter will develop an analysis of the historiographical stakes of astronomical science by connecting Blanqui’s presentation of material eternity and historical exhaustion with his (unconscious) interlocutor, Friedrich Nietzsche. Although the most immediately striking affinity between the two writers is in their shared interest in theories of eternal return, it is in Nietzsche’s early essay, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874), that more substantive comparisons can be drawn. Nietzsche identifies three types of historical investigation and offers a critique of the uses to which they are put, this in the context of what Nietzsche sees as national complacency and cultural self-satisfaction following Germany’s victory in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. Composed in 1874, it is nearly contemporary with Blanqui’s prison text of 1872, also written in conditions of historical disappointment: following France’s defeat in the war and having been absent from the Paris insurrection. Nietzsche’s recognition of the “demand” of contemporary culture “that history should be a science” resonates with Blanqui’s materialist thesis of historical exhaustion, as does his critique of historical culture as a belief in cultural improvement. Blanqui’s conclusion from his hypothesis of infinite plurality is that “there is no progress.”12 Blanqui’s thesis also marks the point when literary whimsy (and alternate history) drops out of the nexus


in which it was combined with astronomical science and historiographical reflection—a point at which science fiction enters the field and imagines civilizations on other planets as alien races, rather than variants of human history.

“An Amusing Philosophical Romance”

Thomas Chalmers is an important figure in this chapter for the nature of his cautionary warnings against the unbridled cosmic speculations of figures such as Immanuel Kant, who had in his *Universal History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755) suggested that “most planets are certainly inhabited, and those that are not, will be one day.” The influence of Chalmers’s *A Series of Discourses on the Christian Revelation: Viewed in Connection with the Modern Astronomy* (1817) is evidenced in the rapid republication of his work (nine editions and 20,000 copies sold in 1817) and in the contemporary attention it drew. The anonymous author of a “Free Critique” of 1817 begins his pamphlet on its stylistic shortcomings with the wry comment that “the newspapers were, with great industry, employed to sound forth Dr. Chalmers’s praises, and Milton named as the distinguished individual whom he *did not eclipse*.” The author of a 30-page response in the *British Review* is prompted to describe Chalmers as “a fixed star in that firmament of science, which he has taught to shine with the radiance of the Gospel,” and Alexander Maxwell published a full-length response to Chalmers in 1820. Chalmers himself was a polymath who wrote and lectured on religious and scientific subjects (Mathematics, Political Economy) and was also a leader of the Free Church of Scotland. He authored one of the Bridgewater Treatises in 1833.

Chalmers established the terms for the debate which would be repeatedly referred to in the nineteenth century, for example his distrust of the imaginative leaps that could be occasioned by analogical reasoning, and his turn to the microscopic to counteract the vertigo of cosmic scale apprehended by the telescope. He also identifies the troubling implications of

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15 anon., *A Free Critique on Dr. Chalmers’s Discourses on Astronomy, or, an English Attempt to “Grapple It” with Scotch Sublimity* (London: R. Hunter and J. Hatchard, 1817), 1.
plurality for the Christian belief in God’s special care of mankind on Earth, and cites a passage from the *Psalms* that would be quoted by Whewell, Brewster and Proctor:

> When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?—PSALM viii. 3, 4.20

Chalmers’s concern is not what we might expect: it is not a denial of plurality on the basis of religious orthodoxy. Rather, it is a warning to the faithful that to indulge in the imagination of other worlds, with the theological concerns that accompany that exercise, is harmful to proper religious faith and feeling. It reproduces the religious doubts that are expressed in the quotation from the *Psalms*. This cautionary style of argument does not explicitly name and demonstrate the lines of speculative thought it wishes to contain, but the implications are apparent—and, importantly, contain an alternate-historical dimension. God’s care of Man is diluted by the possibility of such relationships existing (and having existed) elsewhere. If indeed the resurrection has already taken place on other planets, then the Christian experience of *anticipating* salvation is qualitatively diminished. The heresy of historical alterity here does not involve events taking place differently on other worlds, but rather the resurrection and salvation taking place in the same way elsewhere and robbing human history of its singularity. Brewster in *More Worlds than One* and Flammarion in *La Pluralité des mondes* would present materialist reconciliations of cosmology with salvation and resurrection, but Chalmers’s text attempts no such explanation. Instead, its essential argument is against the speculations that advances in Astronomy could be said to encourage—and, unexpectedly, it is an argument that refers to the authority of Science in order to protect the Christian values of piety and humility.

The Second Discourse of Chalmers is titled “The Modesty of True Science” and begins with praise for Newton’s steadfast empiricism by which no theory is accepted without evidence. “All the sublime truths of modern astronomy lie within the field of actual observation” he writes, “and have the firm evidence to rest upon of all that information which is conveyed to us by the avenue of the senses.”21 As the title of the discourse implies, Science is divided into the true and the false. Newtonian empiricism is championed and contrasted with that which is not properly Science at all, but a form of speculative reasoning which seeks to make claims about what cannot be directly observed. Chalmers castigates thinkers who “have winged their audacious way into forbidden regions—and they have crossed that circle

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20 Chalmers, *Discourses on the Christian Revelation*, 17. Whewell’s application of this quotation outlasted nineteenth-century debates; it is also the taken for the title for a short story by Isaac Asimov, “...That Thou Art Mindful of Him,” published in 1974.
by which the field of observation is enclosed—and there have they debated and dogmatised with all the pride of a most intolerant assurance.”22 Even though it is unlikely that Kant is being referred to here (Laplace is the more likely referent), it is Kant who most clearly expresses the epistemological position that is criticised when he suggests that “conjectures, in which analogy and observations agree perfectly to support one another, have the same dignity as formal proofs.”23 The object of Chalmers’s attack is the mode of reasoning by analogy that stimulates the imagination of worlds which cannot be observed. The analogical movement from the known to the unknown produces the invention of worlds, a process which has more in common with literature than with proper scientific enquiry. Chalmers asks us to imagine that one of these philosophers made so extravagant a departure from the sobriety of experimental science as to pass on from the astronomy of the different planets, and to attempt the natural history of their animal and vegetable kingdoms. He might get hold of some vague and general analogies, to throw an air of plausibility around his speculation. He might pass from the botany of the different regions of the globe that we inhabit; and make his loose and confident applications to each of the other planets, according to its distance from the sun, and the inclination of its axis to the plane of its annual revolution; and out of some such slender materials, he may work up an amusing philosophical romance, full of ingenuity, and having, withal, the colour of truth and consistency spread over it.24

Chalmers is warning that bad reasoning will produce a mode of astronomical writing which is more literary (a “romance”) and fictional (with “the colour of truth”) than properly scientific. The process of “working up” worlds at least implies a hierarchical progression from Mathematics upwards to theological questions: the basic material is observational and positional Astronomy (“distance from the sun,” “the inclination of its axis” etc.), from which assumptions may be made about “the natural history of [other worlds’] animal and vegetable kingdoms”—a line of enquiry that was practised by Robert Chambers and Richard Proctor and will be discussed in the section below. To continue this upwards trajectory would lead to speculation about civilizations of these planets, then to their religions. Chalmers’s hierarchical presentation of the hypothetical life of other planets reaches its forbidden summit when he writes that “the theology of these planets is, in every way, as inaccessible a subject as their politics or their natural history.”25

The position of Chalmers’s readers is complicated by the fact that he is as opposed to the dogmatic denials of other worlds as he is to their supposition: “Are we therefore to say [...] that to this earth alone, belongs the bloom of vegetation, or the blessedness of life, or the dignity of rational and immortal existence?”26 He even imagines a time when other worlds may become visible: “Perhaps some large city, the metropolis of a mighty empire, may expand into a visible spot by the powers of some future telescope”27—an anticipation to which the Moon Hoax would respond. The reader must negotiate a respectful awe for the wealth of creation, be prepared to countenance the existence of other divinely ordained worlds, but is prohibited from imagining their topography and indigenous life. In a figure that recalls Icarus and foreshadows the celestial spirits of Proctor, Flammarion and Hale, to do so would be an act of impossible hubris: “He wings his fancy” to a “hazardous [...] region and vainly strives a penetrating vision through the mantle of [...] an obscurity.”28 Chalmers’s readers were not always able to follow his proscriptions; the author of the British Review article endorses the reconciliation of Christian faith with the telescope, but makes hypotheses of his own, whose historical slant is particularly valuable for this essay: “The Bible intimates that the history of the redemption of our species is known in other parts of the universe, and allows us to conjecture that other worlds may be concerned in the mysterious virtue of the atonement.”29

In the same passage he even suggests the possibility of “unfallen worlds.” Chalmers himself suggests that sin “may have spread its desolation over all the planets of all the systems,” before catching himself and declaring: “Here I stop—nor shall I attempt to grope my dark and fatiguing way, by another inch, among such sublame and mysterious secrecies.”30 He was apparently susceptible to the same temptations of astronomical speculation that he cautioned against.

History & Nebulae

The attempt to “penetrate” a “mantle of as deep an obscurity” is appropriate language for describing nineteenth-century enquiries into the nature of nebulae. The controversy was relatively straightforward: one side maintained that the milky sections of light in the sky (for example in the Orion or Andromeda nebulae) were only indistinct because sufficiently powerful telescopes to differentiate them into distinct stars had not yet been developed. The other followed Laplace’s theory of the annular formation of planets from nebulous masses of

26 Chalmers, Discourses on the Christian Revelation, 27.
27 Chalmers, Discourses on the Christian Revelation, 32.
28 Chalmers, Discourses on the Christian Revelation, 79.
30 Chalmers, Discourses on the Christian Revelation, 80–81.
cosmic gas; according to this theory, the nebulous light in Orion was a new star system in the process of formation. Although this matter was one of material constitution, the nebula was the astronomical puzzle that attracted consideration of whether the history of Earth could be compared with other planets’ histories, and whether the idea of a universal history was reassuring or alarming. Paul Fayter, for example, has shown how late-century works of science fiction derived their central premise of superior intelligence on Mars from Laplace’s nebular hypothesis, according to which planets further from the Sun were formed earlier than Earth and thus had longer histories. In both Robert Cromie’s *A Plunge into Space* (1890) and H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Mars is home to a more technologically advanced civilization than Earth’s, but is also closer to planetary death. 31

Another connection between nebulae and history was made in Thomas De Quincey’s response to the discoveries occasioned by Lord Rosse’s telescope in 1846, in which he saw in the newly explored Orion Nebula figures from literary mythology. The relationship between nebulae and history—and what was at stake in the relationship—is succinctly expressed by William Whewell in the Preface to the third edition of *Of the Plurality of Worlds* (first published in 1853) where he defends himself from David Brewster’s claim that he is an advocate of the “nebular hypothesis”:

That the Nebulae are not in a state of progress towards becoming systems of worlds, is a doctrine prominently asserted and argued for in the following Essay: that the Nebulae are in such a state of progress, is commonly held in conjunction with the assertion of the Plurality of Worlds. 32

For Whewell, the point is a historical one: whether or not nebulae indicate the formation, or ongoing creation, of new star and planetary systems. If other planets are “in a state of progress towards becoming worlds,” that is to say that they are developing, diachronic, and possess a similar historical development to Earth’s, if only as physical objects.

Whewell himself had coined the phrase “nebular hypothesis” in his Bridgewater Treatise, *Astronomy and General Physics Considered with Reference To Natural Theology* (1833), in which he subjects the hypothesis of Laplace to a metaphysical critique by focussing on the question of origin, though he does not reject it on materialist grounds. The Treatise is clearly influenced by Thomas Chalmers’s 1817 work, both in its compensatory turn to the microscope and by its repetition of the quotation from the *Psalms*. Whewell, like Chalmers, cautions against the “unbounded license of hypothesis” but argues that the conflict between


the scale of the universe and the idea of providential care over Earth is only an apparent one.\textsuperscript{33} He is also prepared to accept, so long as “we disregard the common limits of our own faculties,” that “it is quite as allowable to suppose a million millions of earths, as one, to be under the moral government of God.”\textsuperscript{34} He differs from Chalmers in the way he subjects the “nebular hypothesis” to a critique which seeks to impose a common universal history upon the disaggregated chronologies that Laplace’s nebular hypothesis implies by supposing ongoing creation throughout the universe. Whewell insists that the nebula is not the originary object of the universe: there must have been a prior state, a source for the heat and light which animated the nebulae and impelled them to become worlds: “Do we not, far more than ever, require an origin of this origin?”\textsuperscript{35} I do not think it is tendentious to claim that history and its extension into the cosmos is at issue here. Whewell would later deny the nebular hypothesis, rather than question it as an explanation of universal origins as he does here; that denial, as quoted, associates the hypothesis with being “in a state of progress towards becoming systems of worlds.”\textsuperscript{36} The qualified acceptance of nebular formation in the earlier text nonetheless makes the same denial of planetary histories as differentiated, disaggregated and heterogeneous. By affirming the need for a first cause or origin, he incorporates the possibility of ongoing planetary formation within a universal cosmic chronology which began with divine intervention at a single moment of origination.\textsuperscript{37}

In Of the Plurality of Worlds, he has significantly changed his position and argues against nebular formation by questioning the analogical assumption that all sources of light in the heavens are comparable to our sun; he famously suggests that nebulae may be “of a curdled or granulated texture” and that this type of substance may have “run into lumps of light.”\textsuperscript{38} David Brewster would mock Whewell’s curiously textured matter in his 1854 response to Whewell, More Worlds Than One: The Creed of the Philosopher and the Hope of the Christian (1854),\textsuperscript{39} but spectroscopy would show Whewell to be less incorrect than his critic. The fundamental change that takes place in the plurality debate, among the local disagreements, is the increasingly material quality of the debate—in contrast to the metaphysical grounds of Whewell’s earlier appeal to the need for “origin of this origin.” This

\textsuperscript{34} Whewell, Astronomy and General Physics, 282.
\textsuperscript{35} Whewell, Astronomy and General Physics, 189.
\textsuperscript{36} Whewell, Of the Plurality of Worlds, 329.
\textsuperscript{37} Whewell’s desire to incorporate historical changes into the longue durée of cosmic, geological and civilizational time is apparent in his coining of the “Palaetiological Sciences” (the science of first causes)—a term which never achieved common usage, unlike his most famous neologism, “scientist.”
\textsuperscript{38} Of the Plurality of Worlds, 139.
\textsuperscript{39} More Worlds Than One: The Creed of the Philosopher and the Hope of the Christian (London: John Murray, 1862), 5.
materialist turn, away from theological and metaphysical reasoning, brought pluralism in amongst the materialist sciences of the nineteenth century: Bioscience, (Physical) Geography and Geology. Whewell’s later work would have to make its claims upon this terrain. George Levine emphasises the commonality between Whewell and Darwin, despite their disagreements, when he writes that they shared “a commitment to the scientific project, a rejection of any explanation that seems to entail looking beyond laws of nature.”40 Participants in the plurality debate would now have to argue which sciences should or should not inform the argument about the plurality of worlds.

My treatment of the issues will necessarily be brief, but it is important to show how the question of other inhabited planets and their histories came to be an increasingly materialist one: such worlds might actually exist and, given sufficient telescopic or locomotive power, we could therefore come face to face with those counterpart worlds and their inhabitants—a proposition that the Moon Hoax dissembles. Crowe reports that a possible reason for Whewell’s change of position was in response to Robert Chambers’s *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1840), which had intervened in the plurality debate by claiming that the formation of planets and of species were both governed by a set of universal forms that adapted to their environmental conditions.41 Levine indicates a more personal motivation when he suggests that Chambers’s claims derived from Whewell himself: “*Vestiges of Creation* was precisely natural theology extended to evolution, and this was possible by using Whewell’s view that God is the originator of laws which operate naturalistically from the time of their invention.”42

These universal forms are, Chambers claims, the nebula at the cosmic level and the globule at the organic; given the inclination of these forms to produce worlds and life, “analogy would lead us to conclude that the combinations of the primordial matter, forming our so-called elements, are as universal as to take place everywhere, as are the laws of gravitation and centrifugal force.”43 M. J. S. Hodge summarises Chambers’s argument as one of completed development: “Clearly [for Chambers], just as all celestial bodies are more or less perfected and developed nebulae, so all animals and plants are more or less developed globules.”44 The absence of mammals on the Galapagos Islands, reported in Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle* (1845), only reinforced Chambers’s idea of the programmatic development of species into hierarchies: it appeared to him that life evolves in similar patterns on different

44 Hodge, “The Universal Gestation of Nature,” 142.
parts of Earth, but that some places have not yet reached their time for developing higher forms of life. This way of making species development heterogeneous in time and location is a domestic version of (and supporting evidence for) Chambers’s claim that species would develop on other planets as they had on Earth. It also establishes a multi-disciplinary linkage of pluralism to physical investigations on our own planet; in *Other Worlds than Ours* (1870), Richard Proctor would enlist the services of Geology to stimulate the imagination of other Beings in space: “Astronomy and Geology owe much of their charm to the fact that they suggest thoughts of other forms of life than those with which we are familiar.” Interestingly, spatial remoteness is likened to temporal distance; the “epochs when those monsters throne and multiplied” become analogous to the idea of life on other planets, “upon other celestial bodies.”

Whewell, writing in 1853, does not reject analogical relations between the two scientific disciplines, but reaches the opposite conclusion. We are told, in the chapter “The Argument from Geology,” that human life (divinely ordained) occupies only a tiny fraction of Earth’s history as a planet, and we can likewise argue that life is as rare in the space of the universe as it is in the time of Earth’s geological history. The decision to engage one scientific discipline (Geology) to police the pluralist inferences apparently encouraged by another (Bioscience) is made to counteract the sensational success of Chambers’s *Vestiges*, which proceeds in the direction that Thomas Chalmers had prohibited: “to pass on from the astronomy of the different planets, and to attempt the natural history of their animal and vegetable kingdoms.”

Another event in the nebular debate was the occasion for Thomas De Quincey’s extraordinary article of 1846 on Lord Rosse’s telescope, titled “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes.” This instrument, “The Leviathan of Parsonstown,” was the first capable of penetrating the Orion Nebula, and provided evidence that seemed to support the position that all nebulae were resolvable. What Lord Rosse’s “almost awful telescope” effected (it seemed) by resolving the Orion Nebulae into distant galaxies and stars was the dramatic expansion of the universe: “The theatre to which he has introduced us, is immeasurably beyond the old one which he found.” This immensity is, for De Quincey, not only spatial but also temporal—and the description of this immensity that Lord Rosse’s

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47 Proctor, *Other Worlds Than Ours*, 1.
48 Whewell, *Of the Plurality of Worlds*, 89.
50 De Quincey, “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes,” 569.
telescope has revealed provides a sense of cosmic disorientation; the language deserves quotation in full:

Great is the mystery of Space, greater is the mystery of Time; either mystery grows upon man, as man himself grows; and either seems to be a function of the godlike which is in man. In reality the depths and the heights which are in man, the depths by which he searches, the heights by which he aspires, are but projected and made objective externally in the three dimensions of space which are outside of him. He trembles at the abyss into which his bodily eyes look down, or look up; not knowing that abyss to be, not always consciously suspecting it to be, but by an instinct written in his prophetic heart feeling it to be, boding it to be, fearing it to be, and sometimes hoping it to be, the mirror to a mightier abyss that will one day be expanded in himself.51

The passage, with the second sentence’s extended chain of participle clauses that shorten with a spiralling, accelerating effect before ‘resolving’ syntactically, produces a linguistic analogue to the effect of staring into distant galaxies and imagining them as spinning worlds. We recall that the occasion for this is the penetration of nebula: De Quincey ventriloquises for Lord Rosse as an imperative demi-urge “that says to the rebellious nebulæ, —‘Submit, and burst into blazing worlds!’ that says to the gates of darkness, —‘Roll back, ye barriers, and no longer hide from us the inﬁnities of God!”52

Jonathan Smith has demonstrated the limitations to De Quincey’s knowledge of Astronomy, and alerted us to the editorial changes made as a result of correspondence with J. P. Nichol.53 Despite these limitations, it is clear that De Quincey’s essay participates in a cluster of contemporary debates (the analogy of familial relations between planets, the multiplicity of worlds, telescopic technology); the essay intrudes upon the ﬁeld of material Science by providing the subjects with ideational force through their literary presentation. Smith points out that De Quincey has been looking at the wrong drawing of the Orion Nebula: in an essay whose ostensible motivation is the revelations of Rosse’s telescope, he derives his famous description of the nebula from a much older drawing—one by John Herschel of 1826 (see ﬁgure 2).54 This may seem to undermine any scientiﬁc credibility or currency to De Quincey’s virtuoso ﬂights of language; but his subject is not so much the state of astronomical science as the impact of Lord Rosse’s declaration that he had penetrated the Orion Nebula and that all nebulæ were resolvable; also, the philosophical crisis for human perception of the external

51 De Quincey, “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes,” 570.
52 De Quincey, “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes,” 570.
world when he contemplates objects so far beyond his physical being. Rosse’s assertions would be shown much later to be wrong, but De Quincey’s intervention demonstrates that Rosse’s view is more than simply one of the many erroneous beliefs in the history of Science—for it shows how such ideas resonate through the cultural field of thought and criticism. De Quincey explicitly praises Dr. Nichol for his role as “a popularizing astronomer”;55 he recognises that such scientific work contains an “enthusiasm [that] awakens itself upon every road that leads to things elevating for man.” It is able to “minister to what is greater than knowledge, viz. to intellectual power.”56 This commendation of Nichol serves as a justification for De Quincey’s own excursus into popular Astronomy, and his integration of received Science with literary history and mythology, notably in the description of the Orion Nebula:

You see a head thrown back, and raising its face, (or eyes, if eyes it had,) in the very anguish of hatred, to some unknown heavens. What should be its skull wears what might be an Assyrian tiara, only ending behind in a floating train. [....] Brutalities unspeakable sit upon the upper lip, which is confluent with a snout; for separate nostrils there are none. [....] One is reminded by the phantom’s attitude of a passage, ever memorable in Milton: that passage, I mean, where Death first becomes aware, soon after the original trespass, of his own future empire over man.57

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55 De Quincey, “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes,” 575.
56 De Quincey, “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes,” 576.
57 De Quincey, “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes,” 571 (original emphasis).
The act of resolving a distant nebula, made possible by the most advanced telescope, here projects the author’s reflections backward in history, first to antiquity, then to the literary-mythological: he recognises an object of Egyptian statuary in the British Museum, which then gives way to the figure of Death in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The disorientation of contemplating time and space here acquires a historical significance: for if we are imaginatively witnessing the Miltonic, pre-historical event of Death first apprehending the scent “Of carnage, prey innumerable” on Earth (the phrase from Milton which De Quincey quotes), then the astronomer is in the temporally complex position of observing an event that dates from Milton’s version of mankind’s lapsarian origins—crossing a division both of time, and between material and imaginary history. This puzzle of watching the deep past while in the present, a disjunction between the perception of the senses with the experience of the body, will appear in a more scientifically credible sense when Proctor and others consider historical events as the trace impressions of light recording the distant past.\(^58\) Putting aside the issues of fictionality and supernaturalism, the description of Death scenting Earth *only now* is

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intelligible if we consider that smell, like light, would require time to travel to the remote corners of the universe. J. P. Nichol advised De Quincey to withdraw the description of Memnon’s head, suggesting that the interpretation was “more worthy of one whom the moon has smitten, than of one who gazes calmly upon the stars.” Though a rebuke, the criticism acknowledges the effect that reflexive contemplation of planetary bodies may have on the individual—producing the fanciful strain of thought that projects thoughts of life (and death) onto stars and planets.

The turn to Milton’s version of the story of original sin in order to personify the nebula expresses the sort of historical disjuncture that we find in alternate history. Figures from literary mythology populate areas of space only newly accessible to the most modern scientific enquiry. It is a vision of the deep literary past, seen (or imagined) as if for the first time. The essay on Rosse provides an earlier model of historical return when, in a proposed solution to the question of Earth’s age, De Quincey suggests that “she is a Phoenix that is known to have secret processes for rebuilding herself out of her own ashes”—a rarely remarked iteration of the idea of historical return that refers to the mythical figure of the Phoenix. If this is the case, then we can imagine other histories upon Earth, with unfamiliar geographies: “Where the south pole now shuts her frozen gates inhospitably against the intrusions of flesh, once were probably accumulated the ribs of empires; man’s imperial forehead, woman’s roseate lips, gleamed upon ten thousand hills.” We are also invited to imagine “little England” and her “sweet pastoral rivulets” as “a regal Ganges, that drained some hyperbolical continent.”

The notion of imperial capitals in the polar regions on a previous cycle of terrestrial history may be fanciful. But the imagination of England having had dramatic phases of its natural history was also supported by Geology. In an essay included in the controversial Essays and Reviews of 1860, Charles Wycliffe Goodwin suggests that nature had not always been as we know it on the British Isles: “Grand, indeed, was the fauna of the British Islands in these early days. Tigers as large again as the biggest Asiatic species lurked in the ancient thickets; elephants of nearly twice the bulk of the largest individuals that now exist in Africa or Ceylon

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60 J. P. Nichol’s Thoughts on Some Important Points relating to the System of the World (1846) was as important a source for De Quincey’s article as Lord Rosse’s telescope; Nichol himself was a believer in the “nebular hypothesis” and also extended the idea of evolution to the cosmos, as Isobel Armstrong has observed: “It was essential [...] that the nebulae should not be resolvable into stars—or not just yet—in order to demonstrate the living progress of evolution in the cosmos” (“Victorian Studies and Cultural Studies,” 310). An attempt to link the demise of such speculative reflections on astronomy with the rise of technical apparatus would draw attention to the fact that, as with the Moon Hoax illustrations, these images belong to a period when telescopic views still had to be drawn before being circulated.
61 De Quincey, “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes,” 568.
62 De Quincey, “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes,” 568.
roamed in herds. A geological perspective excavates the deep past of Earth and makes it imaginable; it is thus comparable to the effect of a telescopic gaze upon a distant planet, whose visible light represents not its present but its remote past. History is ‘brought to light’ in both of these disciplines. We have seen how reflection upon the deep time of space and disaggregated chronologies of other planets contains an alternate-historical character. In the next section I concentrate on how the increasing importance of light as the marker of stars’ and planets’ identity encouraged imaginative projection into space and a sense of association with celestial Beings.

**Astral Projection**

Spectroscopy transformed astronomical knowledge by providing a means for analysing the chemical composition of light-emitting objects. In 1859, Robert Bunsen and Gustav Kirchoff published their first paper announcing the application of spectrum analysis to the telescope; in 1864 William Huggins published his paper on the stellar spectra of fixed stars, providing evidence for the first time that celestial bodies were made up the same elements known on Earth, and that some nebulae were gaseous and unresolvable. The debate between the resolvers and anti-resolvers was effectively over, and the potentially infinite task of categorising stars according to their spectra began. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison find the spectroscope representative of a new model for scientific objectivity that arose in the late-nineteenth century, one which consisted of “a scientific self equipped with a stern and vigilant conscience, in need not just of external training but also of a fierce self-regulation.” Thomas Chalmers would no doubt have approved of this sentiment.

The effect of spectroscopy upon the plurality debate was not, however, to kill off speculations regarding the life and species-history of other planets; on the contrary, it reinforced the validity of analogical reasoning as a means to speculate about the nature and inhabitants of other planets, which, it could now be claimed, were likely to be constituted of similar materials to those on Earth. Richard A. Proctor joined the plurality debate in 1870 with *Other Worlds Than Ours*, another publication on the topic which soon ran to multiple editions. Proctor had established his credibility as an astronomer with many technical publications, but

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64 Crowe, *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate*, 361. At the risk of over-periodising, 1864 was the year in which the scientific naturalists began to claim the ascendancy and disassociate theological questions from scientific enquiry. It was the year in which the X-Club was founded, the Royal Society awarded the Copley medal to Charles Darwin, and the authors of *Essays and Reviews* (1861) were legally absolved from ecclesiastical censure.
achieved commercial success with his contributions to journals such as *The Intellectual Observer* and *Popular Science Review*. *Other Worlds than Ours* was the first of several books on Astronomy for a non-professional audience. These publications and his prolific output as editor of the journal *Knowledge* from 1881 meant that by the time of his death, “Proctor had become the most widely read astronomical popularizer in the English-speaking world.”66 The connection for Proctor between spectroscopy and the imagination of other worlds is clear. He describes the spectroscope as “a light-sifter” and its usefulness to the astronomer is “to enable him to learn the character of the orbs from which [...] light proceeds.”67 The rapidity with which analogical inferences from the spectroscope move beyond the data of material constitution is clear: “we see at once, that in all probability the other planets are constituted in the same way,” and that “the imagination suggests immediately the existence of arts and sciences, trades and manufactures, on that distant world.”68 There is a willingness to go far beyond the initial question of whether or not life exists on other planets and to render them as counterpart civilizations. The contribution I would like to concentrate on is the reflexivity that Proctor establishes when he considers other Beings for whom Earth and its history are objects of surveillance and interest.

The light reaching our planet contained data of another kind also: popular astronomical writing in the late nineteenth century often dwelt upon how light from remote bodies was the visual presentation of planets’ past histories according to the distance which their light had travelled and the time it had taken to arrive at a human observer. Linda Nead develops an argument that the enhanced powers of visualisation such as the telescopic photograph and the spectroscope encouraged the imagination of other, even more powerful capacities for seeing, such as those of the astral travellers imagined by George Friedrich Eberty and Richard A. Proctor (who will be discussed below). Furthermore, she suggests that the interpretation of planets and stars as “gigantic projecting devices, throwing beams into outer space that bore entire histories of worlds and civilizations” prefigured the operations of the film projector.69 With so many planets’ histories on display, and imaginary Beings able to scroll backward and forward through time, space becomes “a kind of multiplex cinema.”70 My claim moves in a very different direction from Nead’s; whereas she wishes to show how the technological apparatus of nineteenth-century Astronomy anticipated, perhaps enabled, visual technologies of mass entertainment, I intend to show how spectroscopy reinforced a tendency

67 Proctor, *Other Worlds Than Ours*, 37.
68 Proctor, *Other Worlds Than Ours*, 44, 45.
in Astronomy to work by analogy, and invigorated the astronomical imagination of counterpart worlds whose inhabitants might also be imagining us.

By bringing these two aspects of light together (its evidence of celestial composition and its historical information), we arrive at an unexpected formulation of historical materiality (recollecting Walter Benjamin’s comment that the historical materialist looks for the presence of the messianic in history as a physicist looks for the presence of orders of light in the solar spectrum\(^{71}\)). These orders of visuality in which we are not witnessing what is physically in front of us (rather its past or its chemical constitution) enable alternate-historical thought, for they encourage the imagination to work via analogy, and to confabulate an image from what is known or received in our world, in a similar but more empirically based manner to De Quincey’s envisioning of figures from antiquity and myth. This also distinguishes alternate-historical thought from science fiction, in which we are generally confronted with the alien itself which stands before us after space travel on its part or ours—and is striking for its difference from humans, rather than standing as an alternate-historical counterpart. Rather than dwelling on the alien’s physiognomy or designs on our planet, alternate history restricts itself to the imagination of counterpart Beings about whom we can only speculate, in the same way that we look at a map and imagine the occupants of the countries we see marked and outlined.

When Proctor imagines a distant observer watching events unfold at the battle of Waterloo, an alternate outcome seems conceivable: “We can imagine, for example, an observer on Neptune watching the battle of Waterloo from the early dawn until the hour when Napoleon’s heart was yet full of hope, and our great captain was watching with ever-growing anxiety, as charge after charge threatened to destroy the squares on whose stedfastness [sic] depended the fate of a continent.”\(^{72}\) This reinvestment of historical events with suspense as to their outcomes is surely the very same sentiment that, in part, motivated the alternate histories of Napoleon and continues to stimulate the alternate-historical imagination today; his return to the Battle of Waterloo indicates the ongoing perception of that encounter as one on which the history of Europe turned. It also exemplifies a desire to imagine that events, even in the past, can maintain the quality of contingency—that they might have been otherwise. This recalls the idea of Chambers to which Chalmers and Whewell were so opposed (before and after the publication of the \textit{Vestiges}, respectively): the idea of life developing out of the same materials and principles of formation, but in different circumstances and with different results. Tina Young Choi’s recent article illuminates how

\(^{71}\) Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’,” 403.
\(^{72}\) Proctor, \textit{Other Worlds Than Ours}, 322.
evolutionary hypotheses around the mid-century also produced a tendency toward speculative, hypothetical thought; how the idea of contingent evolutionary development encourages the imagination of other, alternate-historical worlds: “To ask the reader to consider the point in branching between two alternatives, to envision that moment of indeterminacy or indecision, even though that point might be in the past, is to invite a re-enactment of that divergence.”73 This return to an anticipatory moment, when outcomes hang in the balance, is achieved by Proctor through consideration of the time taken for light to reach remote parts of the universe:

Yet, while our Neptunian would thus have traced the progress of the battle from his distant world, the conflict would in reality have been long since decided, the final charge of the British army accomplished, the Imperial Guard destroyed, Napoleon fugitive, and the Prussians, who to the Neptunian would be seen still struggling through muddy roads towards the field of battle, would have been relentlessly pursuing the scattered army of France.74

As in other examples of alternate-historical thought, Napoleon is presented as the figure in whom decisively different trajectories of European history are contained. There is an assumption that the Neptunians will share our historiographical bias toward military history and the fate of Europe; the citizens of other planets become a proxy subjectivity which humans can adopt for the purposes of historical reflection.

Proctor wishes to extend the imagination of human history beyond single static locations, and also to give an imaginary observer the powers of selecting his or her viewing material. He invites his readers to “conceive that powers of locomotion commensurate with his wonderful powers of vision were given to this Being, and that in an instant of time he could sweep through the enormous interval separating him from our earth, until he were no farther from us than the moon.”75 Assuming the ability to travel at speeds greater than that of light, human history becomes a narrative which could be subjected to fast-forward or rewind. Other astronomers also practised thought experiments predicated on the idea of an observer with immense powers of vision and locomotion. Edward William Cox has recently been cited as being gripped by a “spiritualist delusion” for believing in the infinite persistence of one’s actions in the universe, and that “[t]he most secret deed that is done lives through eternity.”76

George Friedrich Felix Eberty anonymously published a work in which he engaged in very

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74 Proctor, *Other Worlds Than Ours*, 322.
75 Proctor, *Other Worlds Than Ours*, 326.
similar speculation as early as 1846. He describes a universe riddled, when viewed from various points, with different perspectives on Earth’s (and other planets’) history; he includes a short list of where in the universe one would have to be located to witness important moments of history as if for the first time.\textsuperscript{77} Eberty chooses the appearance of the Saviour and the Council of Worms as his exemplary historical moments, and also imagines super-human speed and vision to fast-forward human history. We can imagine “an observer from a star of the twelfth magnitude capable of approaching the earth in an hour [....] who would live through the period of four thousand years with all their events completely, and as exactly in a moment of time as he did before in the space of an hour.”\textsuperscript{78} Astronomy has thus enabled us to better conceive the observational powers of God, for whom “a thousand years are as one day.”\textsuperscript{79}

Eberty’s conclusion, however, makes a metaphysical assertion about the nature of time itself: this hypothetical ability to concertina time by compressing millennia into hours or seconds has the consequence of exploding the idea of time as the fixed frame or medium in which events take place: “The duration of time is, therefore, unnecessary for the occurrence of events,” Eberty writes. “Beginning and end may coalesce, and still inclose every thing intermediate.”\textsuperscript{80} Proctor also suggests that this supercharged astral travel enables a vision of universal history that approximates to God’s; such a traveller “sees at each instant the whole universe as it has been in the infinite past, as it is now, and as it will be in the infinite future.”\textsuperscript{81} This compression of time into a solid block disturbs the linear chronological frame that Whewell was at pains to protect by insisting on an “origin of this origin.”\textsuperscript{82} It also suggests two possible heresies: that a Being other than God can possess omniscience, and that infinite duration may be a material attribute of the universe rather than a transcendent quality, outside time, which belongs to God (a degradation of “eternity” to “sempiternity”). The threats to religious orthodoxy implicit in these suggestions will be explored by the alternate histories of the 1870s, in particular Blanqui’s text, \textit{L’éternité par les astres}.

The desire to project oneself into space and onto the surface of another planet is written about in depth and detail by James Nasmyth and James Carpenter in \textit{The Moon Considered as a Planet, a World, and a Satellite} (1874). In a section titled “A Flight of Fancy” they describe the feelings of “a thoughtful telescopist—watching the moon night after night,” and write that it is “almost inevitable [...] for such an observer to identify himself so far with

\textsuperscript{77} Eberty, \textit{The Stars and the Earth; or, Thoughts Upon Space, Time, and Eternity}, 29.  
\textsuperscript{78} Eberty, \textit{The Stars and the Earth; or, Thoughts Upon Space, Time, and Eternity}, 36.  
\textsuperscript{79} Eberty, \textit{The Stars and the Earth; or, Thoughts Upon Space, Time, and Eternity}, 37.  
\textsuperscript{80} Eberty, \textit{The Stars and the Earth; or, Thoughts Upon Space, Time, and Eternity}, 38.  
\textsuperscript{81} Proctor, \textit{Other Worlds Than Ours}, 336.  
\textsuperscript{82} Whewell, \textit{Astronomy and General Physics}, 189.
the object of his scrutiny, as sometimes to become in thought a lunar being.” This process requires imaginative completion of the visual data of the earthbound telescopist, who through analogy can confabulate a world whose reality-status is indeterminate:

There is an irresistible tendency in the mind to pass beyond the actually visible, and to fill in with what it knows must exist those accessory features and phenomena that are only hidden from us by distance and by our peculiar point of view. Where the material eye is baffled, the clairvoyance of reason and analogy come [sic] to its aid.

The authors are attempting to downplay the departure from the observed to the imaginary: these features are “only hidden from us by distance and our peculiar point of view” (my emphasis), and “clairvoyance” is subtended by “reason and analogy.” With these remarks as cover, they go on to render the experience of being seated on a lunar crag and witnessing an eclipse of the sun by Earth, with both an image and a passage of descriptive prose:

![Image of eclipse](image)

**Fig. 5.** James Nasmyth and James Carpenter, “Aspect of an Eclipse of the Sun by the Earth” (1885).

At all parts where these conditions obtain, the lunar eclipse-observer would see the ring of light around the black earth-globe brilliantly crimsoned; at other parts it would have other shades of red and yellow, and the whole effect would be to

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make the grand earth-ball, hanging in the lunar sky, like a dark sphere in a circle of glittering gold and rubies.\textsuperscript{85}

The projection of sublime aesthetics onto the cosmos, and of oneself as witness to this alien scenery, can produce a type of anxiety very different from theological uncertainty or the imagination of alien monstrosities. It makes space lonely. The “dreary, desolate grandeur”\textsuperscript{86} with which Nasmyth and Carpenter invest the lunar landscape is illustrative of a pattern in late-nineteenth-century astronomical writing: of thinking of the cosmos as uncomprehending and comfortless. Of course, space can only be thought of as lonely if the means exist to imagine oneself in it. Nasmyth and Carpenter did so by using a telescope to imaginatively project themselves onto the surface of the Moon. Space can also be accessed through the conception of Beings able to inhabit and travel through it, which is the premise for the two alternate-historical texts I examine in the next section, both of which populate space with alternate versions of human history.

**Hale and Flammarion’s Alternate-historical Beings**

*Lumen* (1872) by Camille Flammarion and “Hands Off” (1881) by Edward Everett Hale both begin with the realisation of a celestial Being possessing the supernatural powers of observation and locomotion that Proctor and others imagine. In both, these capacities belong to a celestial spirit who is the narrator of the tale. The outlandishness of such a premise makes it worth pointing out that Flammarion was a respected astronomer who founded and was the first President of the Société Astronomique de France, whose journal he edited. Like Proctor, he had published extensively on technical astronomical subjects as well as producing more popular and speculative works on the plurality of worlds and Beings.\textsuperscript{87} Hale was a short-story writer, historian and clergyman and had no such specialist background, but his alternate-historical short story clearly indicates an awareness of the primary concerns of the pluralism debate.

“I was in another stage of existence. I was free from the limits of Time, and in new relations to Space.”\textsuperscript{88} So begins Hale’s story, which was published in 1881 in *Harper’s Magazine* and is the earliest work that is reproduced in Waugh and Greenberg’s edited collection of *Alternative Histories*.\textsuperscript{89} The narrator is a celestial Being, once a human but now a

\textsuperscript{85} James Nasmyth and James Carpenter, *The Moon Considered as a Planet, a World, and a Satellite* (London: John Murray, 1885), 184.

\textsuperscript{86} Nasmyth and Carpenter, *The Moon*, 188.

\textsuperscript{87} Crowe, *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate*, 379.

\textsuperscript{88} Hale, “Hands Off,” 1.

novice cosmic spirit under the guidance of a mentor. The narrator describes the ability to observe “the motions of several thousand solar systems all together,” all of which he is able to see “with equal distinctiveness.”\(^{90}\) It is made obvious that this Being had once been a scientist, and the passing description of the apparatus he no longer requires indicates an astronomer: he describes being free of “eyepieces and object-glasses, with refraction, with prismatic colors and achromatic contrivances.”\(^{91}\) The reference to liberation from these tools of the astronomer, in particular the spectroscope, also suggests an awareness of the arguments deployed in the plurality debate. This Being, in his cosmic self-education, is able to replay human history, not in terms of its light still reaching distant parts of the galaxy, but as one who can access and intervene in past history. He observes Joseph, son of Jacob, in captivity by the Ishmaelites and is about to help him to escape when his Guardian prevents him, explaining “No. They are all conscious and free. [...] You and I must not interfere unless we know what we are doing.”\(^{92}\)

The story proposes that for such Beings, human history can be revisited and altered, thus creating an alternate-historical trajectory from the one that we know and belong to. Timelines, causality and altered historical trajectories would later become material for science fiction—Poul Anderson’s *Time Patrol* stories and Robert Zemeckis’s *Back to the Future*, for example. The presentation of time as reversible—with alterations having profound consequences—is opposed to alternate history as I have interpreted it, for it does not permit the idea of divergence between timelines, or future history being threatened by rogue time-travellers. Any treatment of time travel which can erase the existing historical trajectory also erases the critical and reflexive distance between the historical time of the reflecting subject and the alternate-historical trajectory he or she imagines. “Hands Off” is an alternate history, for in it the narrator is offered an alternate world with which to experiment, which can then be compared to the history we know. The Guardian points the narrator to a system “just like our dear old system, and world just like our dear old world.” All geography and history are identical to Earth’s and the narrator is allowed to do as he wishes: “‘Here you may try experiments. This [world] is quite a fresh one; no one has touched it.’”\(^{93}\) The narrator allows this double of Joseph to escape, with catastrophic consequences: famines are widespread and unrelieved and the Canaanites rule mercilessly; Greek civilization never develops, nor the Roman. History is characterised by “lust, brutality, terror, cruelty, carnage, famine, agony,

\(^{90}\) Hale, “Hands Off,” 1.
\(^{91}\) Hale, “Hands Off,” 1.
\(^{92}\) Hale, “Hands Off,” 3.
horror.”

At a date which is unspecified but which may correspond to Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, Calvary becomes the site of a final battle between the Molochs and the Canaanites, after which human history is extinguished: “Not a man or a woman, nor a boy or a girl, not a single soul left in that world.”

Except, of course, this is not the world of humanity, merely a copy. When the Guardian presents it, he explains “these are not His children—they are only creatures, you know. These are not conscious, though they seem so. You will not hurt them whatever you do.” The story, then, manages both to present the idea of human history having its doubles in space, on other planets, but reintegrates the idea of plurality into a providentialist account of the cosmos in which Earth is the only world peopled with God’s creations, capable of suffering and possessing souls. The copy-world is inhabited by “shadowy forms” only. It serves to affirm the very opposite implications of plurality to those that troubled nineteenth-century astronomers from Chalmers onwards, who responded to the anxiety that the existence of other worlds in a divinely ordered universe would dilute the special privilege of humankind: “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” Instead, Hale’s story suggests a universe in which all material creation is subordinated to Earth, in which copy-worlds exist as sandpits where novice celestial Beings can experiment in order to apprehend the very providentialism that astronomical speculation called into question. Earth is indeed the only world in the universe, and the narrator, returning his attention to it, comments: “How bright it seemed.” By privileging Earth as divinely sanctioned, and its history as likewise ordained, Hale’s story assumes a single historical trajectory for Earth, and his cosmic alternate history thus belongs to the linear-chronological mode, with Earth’s doubles’ history as accessible by the turn of a dial and the relocation (in time and space) of the observer.

“Hands Off” may be a flight of cosmic whimsy, but it affirms an orthodox cosmodicy by segregating Earth from the rest of universal material creation. Hale pursues the idea of duplicates in another story, “My Double and How He undid Me,” which appeared in The Atlantic Monthly in 1859. In this story, an overworked minister trains a wastrel doppelganger to assume some of his clerical duties, with predictably disastrous results. In Hale’s best known story, “The Man Without a Country” (1863), a serviceman is falsely accused of sedition and condemned to spend this rest of his life on U.S. warships, with the crew forbidden to talk

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to him of home. 100 Here also there is a counterpart and secondary world, devoid of the love and warmth of the homeland, from which the main character is banished until the ending, when it is revealed that he has created a miniature version of America in his cabin. Again, the idea of nation is a coherent whole, even if it exists for individuals only in the mind.

The patriotic message of belonging to one’s country even in an alien environment could stand as a parallel for God’s love and protective care upon Earth in “Hands Off.” These are speculative and retrospective comparisons; what is important for this discussion is the way that Hale’s defence of divine providence turns to alternate history to assert the primacy of Earth’s history over all the others that can be imagined, and that this story so clearly takes up the debates about plurality of worlds from astronomical speculations on the subject, as evidenced by the references to the the technologies of Astronomy (“eyepieces and object-glasses, with refraction, with prismatic colors and achromatic contrivances” 101). I also find that the this story’s omniscient perspective upon history implies an awareness of the popular-astronomical idea that Earth’s history would be available in its totality for a Being capable of these powers of vision and locomotion, as appears in the writing of Eberty and Proctor. The imagination of such a Being is also the premise for Lumen, though Flammarion, as a practising astronomer, is more inclined to foreground astronomical science in his imagination of sibling worlds.

_Lumen_ takes the form of a series of conversations between Quarens, who is given the first-person voice, and the eponymous Lumen, a wiser, more experienced celestial spirit. Lumen describes the process by which the soul leaves the body to become an interplanetary spirit. After the death of the physical body, the soul achieves power of vision “incomparably superior to the eyes of the terrestrial organism.” 102 By effort of concentration, Lumen is able to focus his vision on the topography of specific planets, even to zoom his view to focus on specific locations. 103 He then describes learning to travel to remote planets at the speed of thought (which, unlike the speed of light, is instantaneous) and materialise there in bodily form. He recounts, for the purpose of instruction, the story of his first astral journey, in which he joined a group of observers who have assembled on a mountain top to observe the tumultuous events taking place in Paris. There is a bloody civil war, and these concerned Beings debate whether the human race will destroy itself. Lumen describes his former

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102 Flammarion, _Lumen_, 12. All translations from this work are my own.
103 Flammarion may be prepared to give celestial spirits unrestricted access to the universe, but he is also concerned with pragmatic questions that relate to such observations of history. When asked to describe the famous face of Julius Caesar, Lumen replies that, alas, the law of perspective means that he can only observe the tops of people’s heads (66).
inexperience and his puzzlement on finding that the geography of Paris to be altered: new buildings are not visible and the circumference of the city corresponds to its older limits. He is unsure “if it was the old Paris [...] that I was observing, or if, by a phenomenon no less incredible, it was another Paris, another France, another Earth.”¹⁰⁴ The younger spirit, Quarens, is then offered an extended explanation of how “it is not the present state of the sky that is visible, but its past history.”¹⁰⁵ Lumen’s uncertainty on watching Paris, whether it is the one on Earth or “another Paris,” which raises the seductive possibility of other worlds. He describes his “hypothesis” of multiple versions of Earth: “Given the multitude of stars and of planets which orbit them, I asked myself, what is the probability of finding in space a world exactly like Earth?”¹⁰⁶ Lumen concludes:

There is a very high probability in favour of the existence of one or several worlds exactly resembling Earth, on the surface of which the same history is taking place, the same succession of events, and which are populated by the same flora and fauna, the same humanity, the same men, the same families.¹⁰⁷

We are then told that this is only the delay of light, but Flammarion seems to have gone to considerable trouble to present the idea of parallel versions of Earth here in the dialogue on light and history. We later find a dialogue on “Previous Existence” which concerns precisely the soul’s past incarnations on other planets similar to Earth. Flammarion provides a “rational” explanation of how such Beings might have the sense of having lived on other worlds, which softens the strangeness of his subsequent presentation of interplanetary metempsychosis.

It is the perpetual diffusion of light (and history) in space that makes it possible for Lumen to be aware of his prior incarnations and view them simultaneously. “I have thus before me, my two last existences, which were taking place quite naturally.”¹⁰⁸ Flammarion uses this proposition of previous existence to explain the sensation of déjà vu:

It seemed to me that I had already experienced it. [...] The spectre of Brocken did not seem new to me. It was that I had already lived in analogous regions on the planet in Virgo. The same life, the same actions, the same circumstances, the same conditions. Analogies, analogies! Almost everything I had seen, done, thought on Earth, I had already seen, done, thought one hundred years before on the earlier world.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Flammarion, *Lumen*, 120.
¹⁰⁹ Flammarion, *Lumen*, 121.
The spectre of Brocken is a fitting example of experience repeated on multiple worlds, consisting as it does of an image of oneself cast outwards into space when illuminated in certain atmospheric conditions. It is an image that recurs in nineteenth-century European literature, appearing in Goethe’s *Faust* and in De Quincey’s *Suspiria de Profundis*. The idea of metempsychosis is extended to animals and plants; Lumen has, he reports, experienced life as a rational tree.110 Here, in fictional form, is affirmation that other worlds exist as analogies, not as subordinate copies of Earth, but as comparable versions of each other between which interplanetary spirits migrate.

Hale and Flammarion present entirely different versions of alternate planetary history. Hale’s theologically terracentric universe provides counterpart Earths only for the purposes of educating celestial Beings into the nature of divine providence. There is no suggestion of other worlds in which life has evolved differently or of civilizations other than human having developed; the idea of other planets which have also been redeemed by a saviour would be inimical to the story’s ultra-orthodoxy, which is uncontaminated by any ideas of other, independent worlds. Flammarion’s first mature text, *La pluralité des mondes habités* (1862), had engaged explicitly in the idea of a plurality of redeemed worlds and considered the possibility, among others, that Christ had appeared in different incarnations on different worlds in different forms.111 In *Lumen* he countenances the idea that “the Christian era itself, which would seem from several points of view to necessarily exist in the sky […] is not known by other worlds.”112 Worlds exist, then, in isolation from each other and “the history of the planet Earth and its political dynasties is of utter insignificance.”113 This isolation is traversed by Beings such as Lumen and Quarens, but the possibility of learning from other worlds while in a state of material incarnation is prohibited; only in the sense of *déjà-vu* do we have the intimation of previous existences. The continuation of life as a celestial spirit is not, however, comparable to Christian resurrection. Quarens has the final words of the text, when he considers the consequences of eternal, disembodied existence: “Eternal life! … without … possible … end! I repeated, searching to comprehend, and feeling my brain melt in its skull … Ah! … And I fell as falls a dead man!”114 This nihilism in the face of a universe characterised by infinite duration collapses the ideas of contingent outcomes of events on Earth within a single temporal frame, and thus also adopts the linear-chronological pattern of alternate history.

Flammarion is taking a radically different position toward pluralism from Hale; however discreetly, he is adopting a stance in which the Christian religion is enclosed within
the confines of human history upon Earth; the only universal meaning of immortality is a material and secular one in which atoms and consciousness persist for eternity. The apparatus of celestial spirits allows Flammarion to present a formulation of the soul’s continuation beyond death on other worlds, but in a sense which is chilled by the perception of a cold and uncomprehending universe. The final destruction of the world is described by Lumen late in the text: “Days will become nights, and there will not be springtimes nor summers.” Earth will disintegrate and fall as meteors on distant worlds, whose inhabitants will collect them and place them in natural history museums. Lumen’s perspective on planetary decline and extinction makes time flat and undifferentiated, a materialist eternity in which “atoms have no age.”

These ideas are virtually identical to those in Louis Auguste Blanqui’s prison text, L’éternité par les astres (1872), with which it is exactly contemporary. Blanqui’s text, however, contains no celestial spirits to serve as mouthpieces for this new cosmogony; there is absolute isolation from other worlds on which history has been exhausted, and which are imagined from the position of an incarcerated revolutionary for whom the observation of the universe becomes a meditation on the constraints that Astronomy exerts upon the imagination of better societies.

**Blanqui and the Materialism of History**

Louis Auguste Blanqui wrote L’éternité par les astres at the age of 66, having been imprisoned in the Fort du Taureau for insurrection by the Thiers government (as he had been by every French government since 1830). The Communards are said to have offered a prisoner exchange—Blanqui for all of their hostages—to which Thiers reportedly replied that his prisoner was worth more than an entire battalion. A biography by his friend and correspondent, Gustave Geffroy, casts him as the Christ of France’s revolutionary struggles and commented on his incarceration in the Fort du Taureau: “The old man has been brought to the deepest level of shadow. It is the place chosen to enchain this force, to throw to rot this philosophical flesh.” He was eventually released from this imprisonment, and died in 1881 immediately after giving a public speech in favour of an amnesty for the Communards.

The consideration of alternate-historical outcomes, of “what might have been,” is thus undertaken from quite particular circumstances: those of a committed revolutionary who

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learns while inside a cell in the Fort du Taureau the story of the failed insurrection which he might have led to a different fate. In L’éternité, Blanqui harnesses the idea of plurality to history in a new way: he imagines the universe to be filled with counterpart worlds upon which every historical outcome has taken place as variant arrangements of atoms. The corollary of his claim for the material existence in time and space of all historical alternatives is to strip the universe of teleology, for “fatality doesn’t have a leg to stand on in the infinite, which knows nothing at all of alternatives.” \(^{120}\) In this description of the universe, speculation about other histories becomes a redundant activity, for science tells us that they all have a material existence in a universe which is indifferent to such variations. If the plurality-of-worlds debate in the nineteenth century begins with Chalmers’s admonition against speculation of other worlds, it can be said to end with a similarly cautionary (but differently motivated) treatise against indulgence in counterfactual historical fantasies.

The idea of material eternity had preoccupied Blanqui prior to his composition of L’éternité par les astres in the months after the Paris Commune. In a broadside pamphlet, Science et Foi (1865), he attacked Père Gratry for attempting to reconcile scriptural orthodoxy with the evidences of Geology and Astronomy, and thus presenting “God rigged up in the uniform of atheism.” \(^{121}\) This pamphlet was written in 1865, during a rare period when Blanqui was not incarcerated. It outlines his idea of material eternity, and we can see that a redemptive, theological tone accompanies his description of planetary death and rebirth: “The end of the earth is not the end of the world. The former is no more than an ephemeral grain of sand. The other is infinity and eternity. The stars, like animals, like plants, are born, live and die and of their elements they reconstitute new globes.” \(^{122}\) This redemptive tone is absent in his extended treatment of astronomical science in L’éternité par les astres, and it is hard not to read the secularisation of eternity as cold and indifferent biographically, as a consequence of his incarceration, which he probably believed to be terminal. Under these conditions he wrote a text which Alan B. Spitzer describes as “his pseudoscientific work,” one strewn with the errors of an autodidact regarding the astronomical questions he chooses to address in his prison cell. \(^{123}\)

My reading of L’éternité par les astres is less concerned with the scientific validity of its claims, but examines what I have shown to be the historiographical dimension to the plurality debate in the nineteenth century. Alternate histories have taken place (all of them) and they become objects for reflection from the world we live in, whose history is one in which

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120 Blanqui, “Eternity According to the Stars,” 43.
121 Auguste Blanqui, Science et Foi (l’Idée libre (Conflans-Sainte-Honorine), 1925), 11.
122 Blanqui, Science et Foi, 9.
123 Spitzer, The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui, 34.
historical events have not led to revolution. Blanqui’s acerbic materialism has two objects of critique. The first is the self-satisfaction of modern, post-war Europe in which progress is taken to be a universal truth; in this regard, Nietzsche is Blanqui’s most illuminating interlocutor. The second is the indulgence in fantasies of historical otherness—alternate history, in short. Blanqui effectively prohibits the speculative imagination of other worlds, not for the desires of anxieties it may bring, as Chalmers cautioned, but through the assertion that every conceivable wish has been fulfilled, but for others, on worlds with which we cannot communicate.

Blanqui’s argument is drawn from Laplace’s nebular hypothesis and the discoveries of spectroscopy: he assumes from the evidence of the latter (which shows that celestial bodies are constituted from elements also found on earth) that there are a finite number of elements in the universe. This view of analogous planetary formation is accompanied by an idea of eternal recurrence; time is assumed to be infinite, and Blanqui asserts a false interpretation of planetary life-cycles according to which each celestial body undergoes a process of birth through fiery collision with others, followed by cooling and a period of stability, then disintegration until the next collision restarts the process. This goes on eternally, in an infinity of time. Before looking at the conclusion Blanqui draws from these assumptions of finite materials and infinite duration, it is worth making a number of observations. This is a reiteration of the secular, material eternity of particles that Flammarion asserted in Lumen: “an arrangement of material molecules constantly renewing themselves.”124 The linguistic and imagistic richness of Blanqui’s account of planetary formation deserves quotation:

When, after millions of centuries, one of these immense eddies of stars—having been born and now swirling around, dead together—is able to cover the open regions of space before it, then its borders will collide with other extinguished whirlpools arriving at the encounter. They will then enter into a furious mêlée that goes on for countless years on a battlefield that stretches across billions and billions of leagues. This part of the universe is then little more than a vast atmosphere of flames, unrelentingly furrowed by the cataclysm’s lightning bolts, that instantly volatilize both stars and planets.125

This account of planets colliding and initiating an era of violent rebirth is of course a description of the nebular formation of planets. It also projects a violent tumult into the heavens, one which is revolutionary—in the senses both of being cyclical and of involving tremendous change. Rancière comments that Blanqui’s cosmogony is political, for it demands

124 Flammarion, Lumen, 6.
that a similar reformation take place on Earth. Thus, advances in Astronomy have enabled a
description of the heavens that supplants prior descriptions of celestial order that are called
upon to authorise stable and hierarchical systems of government that privilege stability and
fixed relations between constituent elements. Whereas with Nasmyth and Carpenter, Richard
Proctor and others, there is a tendency for the telescopic to project him or herself into space
as a solitary celestial Being, Blanqui projects insurrectionary politics into the cosmos, figured
by the choice of diction as a condition of perpetual war.

Despite its inaccuracies (and thermodynamic impossibility), Blanqui is attempting to
solve the puzzle of celestial entities such as comets and nebulae by bringing them into
something like an integrated theory. Earth occupies the position of a stable but moribund
planet after its life as a star and prior to its disintegration into its comet phase of
interplanetary dust. The Earth is said to have no future, being bound by a “fatal judgement” to
eventually descend into eternal night and barrenness. Humankind will possess a hospitable
planet only for long enough to develop a primitive knowledge of the physical nature of the
stars. Given this implacable law of destruction, we are obliged in an infinite universe to
accept a view of planetary rebirth: “Either there is resurrection of stars, or universal death”
writes Blanqui. This statement wrests the concept of resurrection from its religious context
while maintaining its tropes: dead planets dwell in “the night’s entombment” until “the
moment will come when their flame will again flash up like lightning.” Eternity and
resurrection become divorced from a Christian narrative of salvation by being rendered,
Blanqui claims, perfectly intelligible as physical processes by modern science. Eternity
degrades to sempiternity, resurrection to a process of cyclical renewal which is inimical to, not
protective of, life and progress. This emptying of religious value from the universe leaves a
cosmology governed by revolutionary struggle, but which is felt as repetition on both the
planetary level (“The same monotony and the same apathy even in the foreign stars” ) and
also for individuals:

What I write at this moment in the dungeons of the Fort du Taureau I will have
written for eternity, on a table, with a pen, in my clothes, in circumstances that
are completely alike. And so it is, for each.

126 Jacques Rancière, “Preface,” in L’éternité par les astres, Nouv. éd. (Paris: Impressions nouvelles,
2002), 10.
We observe a growing preoccupation with the *equivalence* of our world and others—as seen in Nasmyth and Carpenter’s imagination of lunar counterparts, more explicitly in Flammarion’s notion of repeated experience, and finding its most extreme expression in *L’éternité par les astres*. Here, Blanqui derives from modern optical technology, from the stars themselves, the historiographical conclusion that “there’s no progress!”132

The stance that Blanqui reaches from these assumptions is that all history has happened on other worlds, and it is here that the implications of modern Astronomy for historiography occupy centre stage. With finite materials and infinite time for planetary renewals, the finite number of possible arrangements of material elements has already taken place; that is to say, every historical outcome for human civilization has been played out elsewhere, and will continue to be so forever.

Finally, a world is born with our humanity; it develops its same races, its migrations, its struggles, its empires, its catastrophes. All of these peripeteia are going to change its fate, its destinies—throwing it onto tracks that are not at all of our globe. Every minute and every second, thousands of different directions are set before the human race. It chooses one of them, forever abandoning the others.133

In such a universe, infinitely rich with copy-worlds of the Earth, concepts such as fate are inadmissible; they are simply variations in a cosmology in which, unlike that of Hale, there is no master-copy to which others are subordinate. And so we can only reflect upon the alternate histories that have taken place on other planets—this is a particular torment for the unfulfilled revolutionary. We are asked to imagine the many times the English have lost the battle of Waterloo, or to return to any other historical moment when events could have gone otherwise.134 But, unlike Proctor’s sense of history being replayed differently, there is no sense of renewed excitement at the idea of alternative outcomes; we are reminded that every outcome is of equal indifference to the universe which contains all of them.

Blanqui is included in Barton C. Hacker and Gordon B. Chamberlain’s revised bibliography of “alternative” histories; their short note on the text suggests that it is “perhaps the earliest statement of multiple-Earths theory: an infinite universe of finite elements must necessary produce parallel Earths with infinite variations.”135 *L’éternité par les astres* is a precursor to alternate history in the twentieth century, through its imagination of variant histories on parallel worlds; and yet it extends no interest in describing a single alternative

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134 Blanqui, “Eternity According to the Stars,” 44.
historical trajectory apart from its passing comment that battles such as Waterloo have been played out with every possible result. The text is occupied with the mechanics of planetary death and resurrection, and dwells far more on the *equivalence* between this and our sibling-worlds than the differences. Blanqui tells us that other versions of himself sit in identical prison cells, writing “upon a table, with a pen, in the same clothes, in circumstances entirely alike.”\textsuperscript{136} History likewise becomes a series of repetitions, an imprisonment for all: “The same monotony, the same apathy even in the foreign stars,” Blanqui writes in one of the text’s closing sentences.\textsuperscript{137}

*L’éternité par les astres* is an uncomfortable work for the category of alternate history, for it adopts a position that is not at all concerned with describing any fortunate or unfortunate variations, and is implicitly but decisively opposed to fantasies of other histories on other planets and their incorporation into plots of danger and salvation. It is for this reason that nineteenth-century alternate history, although it has a huge successor-literature of alternate-historical fiction in the twentieth century, should be seen as a discrete category with its own trajectory across the nineteenth century. This astronomical trajectory of alternate history closes with Blanqui’s text and its verdict of the futility of alternate-historical speculations—a verdict which responds to the recurring question of the value of such “amusing philosophical romances” derived from Astronomy in the nineteenth century. The despondency of this sentiment of perpetual monotony could be interpreted in various ways: biographically, as the expression of an aged insurrectionist who believed himself terminally vanquished, or as the most stoic and radical argument for revolutionary politics in an indifferent universe—the view Jacques Rancière takes of the text.\textsuperscript{138} The interpretation I pursue here (but not to the exclusion of others) is that there is an object of critique amidst this gloom, which is the complacent belief in the equivalence of modernity with perpetual (that is to say eternal) progress.

This bitter resignation in the face of the universe’s infinite extent might seem to place *L’éternité par les astres*, like *Lumen*, in the linear-chronological mode of alternate history. There are, however, differences from Flammarion’s position: confronted by this infinite series of duplicates (those other Blanquis who also languish in identical prison cells), the individual is forced to fend for him or herself, and if revolutionary politics have been transferred (or transvalued) to the realm of planetary rebirth, the recognition of universal mechanics enables a different critical reclamation of the idea of historical alternatives. We can recognise, Blanqui argues, the vacuity of the bourgeois notion of historical development. This is the form of

\textsuperscript{136} Blanqui, “Eternity According to the Stars,” 57.

\textsuperscript{137} Blanqui, “Eternity According to the Stars,” 59.

\textsuperscript{138} Rancière, “Preface.”
insurrection that Blanqui can exercise from his imprisonment. In an inverse manoeuvre to a romantic idea of the redemption of historical material, Blanqui claims that there is a lesson to be derived from alternate pasts, which is their redundancy. This is what makes *L’éternité par les astres* the most critical-reflexive of all uses of alternate history.

His declaration against cultural advance is, crucially, dependent upon the achievements of a technologically advanced culture, one in which the academic disciplines are becoming increasingly professionalised and governed by scientific values. Nietzsche also turns to an astral figure in order to describe the same process in his diatribe against historical self-satisfaction, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874), when he writes that the “constellation of life and history” has been profoundly altered by the interposition of “a gleaming and glorious star”—that is “by science, by the demand that history should be a science.”\(^{139}\) Blanqui’s text (though limited in its audience and contemporary influence) illustrates how the plurality-of-worlds debate in the nineteenth century arrived at a point where it both reflected the cultural advance of Science and was able to critique this advance by examining its historiographical implications through the newly developed optics of Astronomy. Blanqui thus stands in a relation with Nietzsche, not only through their common interest in the eternal return of history, but in the way they both turn to astronomical figures in order to lambast the historical complacency of modern culture.

Nietzsche says of “monumental history” (which can be glossed as “romantic history”) that it suffers from the requirement that its foundational principle, the return of historical greatness in later ages, be true literally and materially:

That which was once possible could present itself as a possibility for a second time only if the Pythagoreans were right in believing that when the constellation of the heavenly bodies is repeated the same things, down to the smallest event, must also be repeated on earth: so that whenever the stars stand in a certain relation to one another a Stoic again joins with an Epicurean to murder Caesar, and when they stand in another relation Columbus will again discover America.\(^{140}\)

A number of features recur from the astronomical works already discussed: there is the quality of suspense that contemplating the repetition of history can produce that we encountered in Proctor, and the idea of history endlessly repeating itself in space and time from Flammarion. This interlocking of human history with the material arrangement of the cosmos is derived, Kaufmann writes, from a passage in Heinrich Heine’s posthumously published *Letzte Gedichte*

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\(^{140}\) Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” 70.
und Gedanken (1869).\textsuperscript{141} It also marks the most obvious parallel with Blanqui’s cosmology in which history and materiality are one and the same, consequently freezing the concept of progress into a cold eternity inimical to the concept of cultural advance. This conjunction of Blanqui and Nietzsche as critics of modernity was perceived by Benjamin, who planned a work on Baudelaire in which a section, to be titled “The Commodity as Poetic Object,” would examine Blanqui and Nietzsche together.\textsuperscript{142} Nietzsche writes that monumental history will only become intelligible for the modern age when history can be known and predicted by those capable of deriving historical events from the arrangements of atoms across the cosmos, “when the astronomers have again become astrologers.”\textsuperscript{143} Blanqui, too, makes history a function of astronomical materialism: a science that reduces events to environmentally determined variations of matter. Our future and all the others are out there among the stars, and all past alternatives that could have taken place.

The historiographical aspect of this complacency is clear to Nietzsche, as it is to Blanqui. In his first untimely meditation, “David Strauss, the confessor and the writer,” he identifies the dangers that afflict German culture in the aftermath of military victory over France. These include an automatic and unreflecting homage to the “classics” which leads to the self-satisfied view that culture has already produced its greatest treasures and that “all seeking is at an end.”\textsuperscript{144} Another danger is disciplinary: the transformation of “sciences” such as Philosophy “which might be expected to disturb their complacency” into historical disciplines.\textsuperscript{145} What follows is cultural philistinism: “stupefaction is now the goal of these unphilosophical admirers [...] when they seek to understand everything historically.”\textsuperscript{146} The critique of modern historical consciousness is developed in “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in which Nietzsche talks about an “excess of history” and History as a “malady.”\textsuperscript{147} (I capitalise “History” here as it is being treated as a discipline.) As with the unreflecting celebration of the classics, the effect of the modern mania for historical knowledge is first “to lose this sense of strangeness, no longer to be very much surprised at anything” and finally “to be pleased with everything—that is then no doubt called historical

\textsuperscript{143} Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” 70.
\textsuperscript{145} Nietzsche, “David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer,” 10.
\textsuperscript{146} Nietzsche, “David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer,” 11.
\textsuperscript{147} Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” 64, 120.
that the inhabitants of other planets are radically different Beings from humans, rather than Science fiction depends upon those possibilities that Blanqui denies in _L'éternité par les astres_.

Astronomical questions fade out of the picture, just as the study of literature had a diminished and determined rather than providentially directed, the incursions of literature upon an astronomical critique, a point he makes explicit in the following sentence: “There is, however, a fault: there is no progress!” Blanqui’s critique also applies to the static and moribund historiography, as Nietzsche does, by presenting it back to itself as the mechanical nature of the universe, an indifferent and recurring materialism in which crinoline and chignon are as eternal as any other arrangement of atoms. Benjamin calls this critique by Blanqui “the most terrible indictment of a society that projects this image of the cosmos—understood as an image of itself—across the heavens.” By making cultural ephemera stand for eternity, Blanqui subjects the idea of historical change and novelty to an astronomical critique, a view that he makes explicit in the following sentence: “We have reached the goal, we are the goal, we are nature perfected.”

In formulating history as material, as an adjunct of Science, whose outcomes are finite and determined rather than providentially directed, the incursions of literature upon astronomical questions fade out of the picture, just as the study of literature had a diminished role in the increasingly professionalised discipline of History in the late nineteenth century. Science fiction depends upon those possibilities that Blanqui denies in _L'éternité par les astres_: that the inhabitants of other planets are radically different Beings from humans, rather than

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149 Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” 120.
variant (and monotonous) forms of ourselves; also, that communication with these Beings can take place through space travel and (possibly violent) encounters. Difference and the technical means of communication will help to establish a literary category from which astronomical history stands apart, modestly restrained in its self-absorption (thinking of other worlds populated by Beings like ourselves) compared to the possibilities of adventure, horror and machine-love of scientific romance. The significance of the break that science fiction makes with astronomical speculation is indicated in Israel Zangwill’s contemporary and sceptical review of Wells’s *The Time Machine*, in which he avers that “in verity, there is no Time Traveller, Mr. Wells, save Old Father Time himself.”156 Instead, Zangwill claims, the only meaningful sense of time travel is in the observation of the past, as already discussed, as light and sound travelling through space at finite speeds—the concept of history whose consideration by nineteenth-century astronomers has been discussed in this chapter. Time is “repeating itself in vibrations farther and farther from the original point of incidence; a vocal panorama moving through the universe across the infinities, a succession of sounds and visions that, having once been, can never pass away.”157 The distinction that underlies Zangwill’s refusal to countenance self-directed time travelling is between science fiction’s suspension of physical laws in its literary spaces—with subsequent introduction of non-existent mechanics—and the imaginary journeys into space and alternate-historical worlds that the terms of the plurality debate encouraged.

The initiation of time travel as directed by the individual subject’s mastery of physics and machinery transforms the idea of plurality entirely: those other worlds become named and their inhabitants described, as opposed to the always-speculative quality of pluralist conjecture which casts its gaze into the cosmos indiscriminately. Civilizations were always thought of as coming into view one day, when sufficiently powerful telescopes would be developed. Science fiction—in the manner of the Moon Hoax—claims to encounter the evidence of these alien cultures, and the transition from topographical description to claims of visible culture is neatly encapsulated in Giovanni Schiaparelli’s 1877 description of Martian “*canali,*” which was mistranslated as “canals” instead of “channels” and is said to have stimulated the idea of Mars as an inhabited planet.158

These closing remarks on science fiction are intended to clarify how the category, despite its alien worlds, stands outside of the nineteenth-century trajectory of the plurality-of-worlds debate. That debate is book-ended by the theological framing of the plurality debate by Chambers, whose anxieties were taken up by and returned to by Flammarion, Blanqui and

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158 Fayter, “Strange New Worlds of Space and Time: Late Victorian Science and Science Fiction,” 269.
Hale’s texts (though they reach very different responses to it), and at the other end by Blanqui’s secularisation of the theological approach to the question of plurality. The quotation from the Psalms echoes through the debate in the nineteenth century. The application of optical technologies to the question of other worlds’ histories turned it from one of metaphysics to physical possibility (though always beyond the empirical reach of optical technologies), and in this way the historical dimension of the notion of plurality became an increasingly material one. Once the imagination of other worlds moved beyond issues of salvation, their histories became imaginable in material terms; it became possible to think of their politics and institutions, as Proctor does, and to imagine them as counterpart worlds to ours. The affinities between Blanqui and Nietzsche help us to understand the former’s historiographical pessimism, represented in astral figures: a near-infinite variety of historical outcomes is almost identical to Nietzsche’s assertion of eternal return. The incidence of alternate histories in the late-century should, thus, not be automatically absorbed into the later category of science fiction. They stand as a local instance of the wider argument of this thesis: that alternate history in the nineteenth century is marked by its difference from its later expressions, to which it does not stand in a relation of precursor or parent.
Chapter 5
Late-Victorian Alternate History

Introduction: Juxtaposed History

After passing through a number of underground caves, the narrator who introduces the text of Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) describes arriving in a larger cavern with a domed roof. “An aperture in the midst let in the light of heaven; but this was overgrown with brambles and underwood, which acted as a veil, obscuring the day, and giving a solemn religious hue to the apartment.”¹ The two explorers realise that they have found the Sibylline Cave, and the story of *The Last Man* is only one of the many narratives of the future written on bark leaves.

We could make out little by the dim light, but they seemed to contain prophecies, detailed relations of events but lately passed; names, now well known, but of modern date; and often exclamations of exultation or woe, of victory or defeat, were traced on their thin scant pages.²

Shelley’s cave demonstrates the accessibility of history as a *place* throughout the nineteenth century, with pasts or futures conceived as reachable through the subterranean passage, the mirror, the dream, or apocalyptic event. In the texts I consider in this chapter, where these means of imagining an alternative world are used, another history is thought of as taking place within our present—or, to put it another way, in another historical space that is proximate to our own. The same is true of the astronomical speculation discussed in the previous chapter, in which ideas of historical development were projected onto other planets, and variant futures and pasts were imagined as already having happened in space. The figures of garden and map that I have chosen to represent the romantic-utopian and critical-reflexive modes of alternate history reflect the locative conception of history. It is with the invention of a time machine that this spatial quality of history disappears from the scene. Foucault’s declaration in “Of Other Spaces” that “the great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history” is followed by the claim that the nineteenth century also produced the current “epoch of simultaneity […] of juxtaposition.”³ In this chapter I argue that the historical juxtapositions that are implied by alternate history’s romantic-utopian and critical-reflexive modes fade out of the alternate-historical imagination by the end of the century, which becomes dominated by a linear-chronological timeframe (so I am not following Foucault’s assignment of “juxtaposition”

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² Shelley, *The Last Man*, 3.
³ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 229.
to later alternate histories). Those spatially proximate figures of the garden and the map are superseded by its figuration as a destination to which one can voyage by directing the controls of a machine.

By the end of the century, alternate history has become dominated by its linear-chronological mode, which can be linked to the rise of scientific historiography, the rise of science fiction, and of disciplinarity more generally (as in the case of Astronomy). Nevertheless, the romantic-utopian and critical-reflexive patterns persist in alternate-historical writing into the 1870s and 1880s, where they are recapitulated. In this chapter I examine the work of three writers of the late-century and concentrate on one text by each in particular to illustrate how all three modes were still in operation at this time. These are Richard Jefferies (After London; or, Wild England, 1885), William Morris (News from Nowhere; or, An Epoch of Unrest, 1890) and H. G. Wells (The Time Machine, 1895). These texts, dated at five year intervals, summarise alternate history’s modes in the nineteenth century; they iterate its patterns of romantic and critical historiography (Jefferies and Morris respectively), and Wells’s novella introduces an entirely new type of protagonist. With it comes a newly scientific interpretation of historical possibilities, enabled by the technological apparatus that is introduced to allow time travel between historical settings. The alternate history is no longer ideational (already here in thought), but—within the physics of the novel—reachable and therefore concrete and real.

By returning to these familiar texts and considering them to be the culmination and final expression of an alternate-historical tradition that spans the nineteenth century, they no longer seem to be part of a fin-de-siècle literary moment that initiates them. Jefferies’s post-apocalyptic vision can be interpreted as a further example of planting a utopian promise into the past in the manner of Disraeli’s novel Alroy; the critical reflexivity of Morris’s dream of a socialist utopia derives from his awareness that he is mapping an image of the past upon the topography of the present in order to transform familiar appearances. These writers present their alternate histories spatially, and the figure of the overgrown garden applies to Jefferies’s “Wild England”; for Morris the map of Nowhere is overlaid upon the familiar landmarks of London, whose scale of correspondence is one-to-one. Wells’s novella also brings the future society into a spatial relationship with the present day in a way which I argue is alternate-historical. Its “rigid four-dimensional space time framework”4 indicates most clearly of all the spatialisation of historical time, but as an axis, and the figure that stands for Wells’s incorporation of time into navigable space comes from the instrument panel of his time machine: the dial. The interrelationships between these texts (Morris had read Jefferies and

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Wells had read Morris) provide rich critical material for reading them alongside one another. They also constitute in microcosm the qualities that defined alternate history across the nineteenth century, in its transformation from the leaves in a Sibylline cave to a time traveller’s report from the future.

I. Jefferies and Utopia: The Eternal Now

Richard Jefferies came to prominence with a series of three letters, published in the Times in 1872, in which he commented on the generally favourable conditions of the Wiltshire farm labourers that resulted from the healthy and organic interdependence between landowners and labourers. He became a prolific chronicler of country life for London journals and published adult and children’s fiction. At the time of his death in 1887, at the age of 38, his reputation was sufficiently established for his wife to be granted a Civil List Pension, and for Walter Besant to undertake a biography of Jefferies, which was published in 1888.5 Martin J. Wiener has described him as “the foremost late Victorian country writer.”6 In literary criticism of the past 50 years, however, Jefferies’s name appears more often in the field of science fiction studies, as a precursor to writers such as Wells, and it is his post-apocalyptic novel After London that is most commonly cited.7 By describing Jefferies as a writer of alternate history, however, we can read him afresh, as a late-nineteenth-century proponent of the romantic-utopian mode of historical reflection. After London describes a wild garden in which Jefferies is able to suggest the development of new and better species of government as available through a historical return that functions as a ‘weeding out’ of current depredations. His visionary writings set in London reveal his desire for the utopian city to be realised on its current degraded site. The perception of current existence as an aberrant, fallen phase of existence (in which history is discordant with nature), links Jefferies to Carlyle.

This our earth this day produces sufficient for our existence. This our earth produces not only a sufficiency, but a superabundance, and pours a cornucopia of good things down upon us [....] Why, then, have we not enough? Why do people die of starvation, or lead a miserable existence on the verge of it? Why have millions upon millions to toil from morning to evening just to gain a mere crust of bread?8

If Richard Jefferies had not read *Past and Present*, the sentiment expressed is precisely the same as that of Carlyle 40 years earlier, who also contrasted the “unabated bounty” with which “the land of England blooms and grows” with the condition of two million unemployed workers who “sit in Workhouses”—which Carlyle views as, in effect, “Poor-law Prisons.” In both Carlyle and Jefferies, two worlds overlap; to put it differently, two versions of this world are apparent: one which is cornucopia, and another, a “strange new To-day” in which men and women are denied the products of nature’s bounty and consequently suffer. This double-vision of Carlyle and Jefferies needs to be distinguished from earlier imaginations of the land of plenty, or Cockaygne, which A. L. Morton defines as “the land where everything comes true,” and which is therefore “the Utopia of the hard-driven serf, the man for whom things are too difficult.” Carlyle’s and Jefferies’s lands of plenty are not realms of the wishful imagination, in contradistinction to this world of pain and want. If anything, the fulfilled world of nature’s bounty is more real for them both, and the experience of hunger and arduous toil is an aberration from how things ought to be. We feel this in Carlyle’s comparison of the labourers’ condition to being victim of a spell that has been cast over them: “They sit there, pent up, as in a kind of horrid enchantment,” recalling his more general division between the “eternal inner Facts of the Universe” and “the outer Shamtrue.” In the passage above, the abundance of nature is such an “eternal fact,” whereas the want, starvation and suffering are made contingent by being subject to the question “Why?”

Jefferies’s descriptions of rural life contain uncompromising critiques of inequality and deprivation, as in *The Gamekeeper at Home* (1878), *Hodge and his Masters* (1880) and *Nature Near London* (1883). “John Smith’s Shanty,” for example, is a bleak account of rural poverty, leading to alcoholism, violence and imprisonment. It closes with an address to the reader: “This is no fiction, but an uncompromising picture of things as they are. Who is to blame for them?” We are surprised that a celebrated writer of the countryside offers accounts of the coarsening that results from rural life and labour. Women who work the fields are weathered like trees: “In childhood they are too often thin and stunted; later they shoot up and grow taller.” Contemporaries of Jefferies such as Edward Thomas were struck by the violence

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10 Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 12.
14 Jefferies, *The Toilers of the Field*, 147.
contained in stories such as Wood Magic: A Fable (1881), as Nick Freeman has noted. Jefferies’s utopian passages and texts depart from such material hardships by describing visionary moments of fulfilled “soul-life” achieved through the transformations of familiar space that involve an escape from historical time—understood as the grinding procession of the seasons in the countryside and the accumulation of dirt and misery in cities. After London depends upon an escape from the historical time of the nineteenth century into the past in order to imagine a historical trajectory which does not reproduce the same conditions of suffering again.

The date in which After London is set is ostensibly in the future, but rather than technologically enabled, both society and the landscape have regressed to earlier forms: feudalism and uncultivated wilderness. An undisclosed apocalyptic event has caused society to devolve in this way, but as one consequence of this event is the loss of written histories, the origin of this change is unknown. The narrator reports one rumoured cause—“the passage of an enormous dark body through space,” which is described as “the ‘Unknown Orb’.” This setting, in a socially and agriculturally primitive society, encourages a reading of After London in conjunction with News from Nowhere and The Time Machine. The process of change with which the novel begins, of nature’s return to the condition of pre-socialised wilderness, is where Jefferies’s abilities as a chronicler of natural life are singularly appropriate to the literary portrayal of dystopian futurism, which from the first words of the novel is couched in a complicated temporal setting at the limits of memory: “The old men say their fathers told them that soon after the fields were left to themselves a change began to be visible. It became green everywhere in the first spring, after London ended, so that all the country looked alike.” Although the narrator does not, apparently, have access to the nature of the apocalyptic event, he is able to provide a naturalist’s detailed account, lasting ten pages, of how the fields reverted to meadows and thickets, and how rivers dammed and flooded:

> By the thirtieth year there was not one single open place, the hills only excepted, where a man could walk, unless he followed the tracks of wild creatures or cut himself a path. The ditches, of course, had long since become full of leaves and dead branches, so that the water which should have run off down them stagnated, and presently spread out into the hollow places and by the corner of

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what had once been fields, forming marshes where the horsetails, flags, and
sedges hid the water.\textsuperscript{19}

The observer and writer of the English countryside is especially qualified to deliver this
ecologically informed type of science fiction, especially when some of these transformations
had already been observed by Jefferies in the late 1870s and early 1880s as a result of the
decline of the agricultural economy. In a passage from \textit{Chronicles of the Hedgerows} (1879) he
reports the consequences of wet seasons and economic circumstances:

The general depression of agriculture and the price of labour has for the last two
or three seasons led farmers to stint expenditure of labour, so that the cleaning of
the soil has not been well carried out. Now the consequences of this neglect—in
many cases forced upon them—are apparent: the weeds are rampant.\textsuperscript{20}

These observations of the changes taking place in the landscape as a result of declines in crop
prices, labourers’ wages and of wet weather provide the material for Jefferies to extrapolate
these symptoms in fiction; but the reclamation of land by nature—agricultural development in
reverse—is also accompanied by societal devolution.

Whereas the return to a social organisation that resembles feudalism is a feature of
both \textit{News from Nowhere} and \textit{After London}, the arrangement in the latter is one that the
author does not make attractive—despite Raymond Williams’ comment that the woodland
society of Jefferies’s novel is “the ‘rural’ equivalent of William Morris’s ‘medievalism’.”\textsuperscript{21} The
woods are filled with thieves and murderers, local authority is presented as corrupt and
boorish, and citizens live in conditions of servitude. Criminals are made slaves of the local
state, bonded labour may be bought and sold, and “a child from its birth is often declared to
be in debt.”\textsuperscript{22} The political principle of “original equality of all men”—one whose similarity to
the phrase in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is not a coincidence, as I will suggest below—is said
to have been lost.\textsuperscript{23} Liberal politics are as remote and forgotten as the mythical technology of
the nineteenth century: trains are half-remembered as “certain machines worked by fire,
[which] traversed the land swift as the swallow glides through the sky.”\textsuperscript{24} This estrangement
between cultures, so staple a feature of utopian and dystopian literature, is internalised and
temporalised; the longings of the main character, Felix Aquila, for an enlightened era of politics
and culture leave him in the same position as David Alroy in Disraeli’s novel: of a traveller with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Jefferies, \textit{After London}, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Raymond Williams, \textit{The Country and the City} (St Albans: Paladin, 1975), 238.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Jefferies, \textit{After London}, 23.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Jefferies, \textit{After London}, 24.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Jefferies, \textit{After London}, 15.
\end{itemize}
progressive values that nineteenth-century readers will recognise, but marooned in a primitive (though a future) epoch.

Felix is a sensitive and discontented hero, whose interest in the culture of past times and solitary character make him an outcast from the boorish life of his village; “learning” is now “of all things the most despised.” He has managed to build a sailing canoe and navigate using a compass preserved from earlier times, and sets out to explore the inland lake that is the site of trade and piracy in this post-apocalyptic England. This lake and the absence of any communication with other countries have inverted the nation’s geography: the sea within rather than without. He arrives at the eastern end of the lake, which is a toxic swamp that is deadly to enter—the site of the former capital:

For all the rottenness of a thousand years and of many millions of human beings is there festering under the stagnant water, which has sunk down into and penetrated the earth, and floated up to the surface the contents of the buried cloacae.

All of the city’s life, material and colour have been consigned to death and polluted, unconsecrated burial by Jefferies—a transformation that seems extravagantly vengeful. He would liquefy the capital in a gentler manner in The Story of my Heart when he calls it “the vortex and whirlpool, the centre of human life on the earth,” and talks of its flow of inhabitants as a rising and falling tide. But this eradication of the city makes it possible for Jefferies to conceive the building of a different future civilization, one which is not a repetition of the past.

This is where the novel’s alternate-historical content appears: in a divergence from historical repetition, in the romantic-utopian pattern of returning to the past in order to imagine a better society. Felix happens upon a store of gold in the infested swamp of London, and escapes alive thanks to a favourable wind from the West that blows the deathly miasma clear as he is on the verge of losing consciousness. He sails into clearer air with a treasure that will provide him with the security to build his own village and invite his beloved, Aurora, to come with him. (The romance narrative of After London is grudgingly derivative.) His dreams of landowning domesticity are interrupted by an attack by murderous pirates upon a tribe of shepherds in which he intervenes and, with his longbow, he is able to drive off the marauders. The shepherds and their neighbouring tribes then ask Felix to become their lord; he declines but proposes another political arrangement:

25 Jefferies, After London, 32.
26 Jefferies, After London, 27.
27 Jefferies, The Story of My Heart, 68.
He explained his plan to the chiefs; it was that he should be called simply ‘leader’, the Leader of the War; that he should only assume royal authority in time of war; that the present chiefs should retain their authority, and each govern as before, in accordance with ancient custom. [...] In the course of a fortnight, upwards of six thousand men had joined the Confederacy. 28

The final word in this passage points toward the United States and the novel’s confederate alternative to a European course of historical development from feudalism to the modern state—and in Jefferies’s scheme, back to feudalism. By imagining an alternative outcome, Felix is setting the course of British history onto an alternate trajectory out of its dark ages, which is inspired by the model of America and which will not lead to the suffering that Jefferies describes in the cities and countryside of the nineteenth century. As was the case with Alroy, a political legacy is implanted into the past (at least, into a regressed society and landscape) where Jefferies hopes it will flourish. The spatial character of this promised garden (and its location relative to England) is indicated in the closing sentence of the novel: “The sun sank; still onward; and as the dusk fell he was still moving rapidly westwards.” 29

We should recall the echo of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address that was audible when the narrator describes the loss of “the original equality of all men.” Lincoln’s speech following the victory of the Union armies over the Confederacy in 1863 is the most succinct modern expression of the desire to recover a lost political legacy and, as such, belongs in the category of alternate history. The version of the Address inscribed in the Lincoln Monument begins: “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” The “proposition” of equality is one that is located in the past, but whose relation to the present is not guaranteed. Instead, the present is the site where current events test “whether that nation [founded in the past], or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” This project of defending existing principles of democracy on the site of a battlefield is itself recursive, for it inherits an oratorical tradition from Greece, in particular Pericles’s Funeral Oration as recorded by Thucydides. 30 What makes the proposition by Lincoln and its reformulation by Jefferies alternate-historical, is that it presents the “the great task remaining before us” as doubly redemptive: “that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of their devotion.” A moral imperative demands that we devote ourselves to a cause, as others did before us. The alternative in which such a political ideal is abandoned is implied, for the desired “new birth of freedom”

constitutes a history in which the famous tripartite foundation of government (of, by and for the people) “shall not perish from the earth.”

In After London, the principle of equality has vanished from the Earth, and Felix’s role is to recover this ideal and foster it in an agriculturally and socially reset historical scenario. The novel ends with its hero returning to establish a domestic and political order which, the language suggests, is both new and a reiteration: “This is the first step homewards to [Aurora]; this is the first step of my renewed labour.”\(^3\) The opposition of alternate history to linear history is again apparent—within which that which perishes dies forever. Rather, it is a prophecy, with no guarantee of its fulfilment, and belongs to an understanding of of circular time in which a proposition that is closed off by historical events can be imaginatively redeemed and reflected upon.

London is again the site of both fallen and redeemed humanity in the wonderfully rich piece “The Lions in Trafalgar Square,” which was posthumously published in 1892 in Longman’s Magazine.\(^2\) Here, the lions are taken to be the emblems of an ideal city, one superimposed upon the grime of its physical existence:

The lions of Trafalgar Square are to me the centre of London. By those lions began my London work; from them, as spokes from the middle of a wheel, radiate my London thoughts. Standing by them and looking south you have in front the Houses of Parliament, where resides the mastership of England; at your back is the National Gallery, that is art, and farther back the British Museum, books. To the right lies the wealth and luxury of the West End; to the left the roar and labour, the craft and gold, of the city.\(^3\)

This is the city cleansed. Its politics and commerce have become elevated into pure concepts while maintaining their geographical location. The lions themselves (“far finer than those that crouch in the Zoological Gardens”) are “no more touched than Time itself by the alternations of the seasons.”\(^4\) A similar transcendence from history and the natural world is expressed in another London reverie: “Above the indistinguishable roar of the many feet I feel the presence of the sun, of the immense forces of the universe, and beyond these the sense of the eternal now, of the immortal.”\(^5\) These visionary experiences are very different from Morris’s representation of a socialist utopia, but for both writers the better, fulfilled life is superimposed on the sites of squalor and suffering in a moment of historical suspension, and

\(^3\) Jefferies, After London, 147 (emphasis added).
\(^3\) Jefferies, “The Lions in Trafalgar Square,” 528.
\(^4\) Jefferies, “The Lions in Trafalgar Square,” 528.
\(^5\) Jefferies, The Story of My Heart, 72.
permits alternations between degraded and utopian states from the same geographical location of Trafalgar Square. Just as After London imagined the South-East of England as a wild and overgrown garden, which could be redeemed as the nursery for a new confederated politics, so the city becomes a site for an escape from history, but one which importantly maintains the same orientation and cardinal marks: culture, learning, refinement and commerce stand in the same compass orientation, as seen from the lions in Trafalgar Square, “as spokes in the middle of a wheel.”

II. Rest and Unrest in Morris’s Dream Novels

He walked into the tatters of flame, but they did not bite his flesh—they caressed him, bathed him without heat and without combustion. With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he realized that he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “The Circular Ruins”

The only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author.

—William Morris, Review of Looking Backward

A. L. Morton claimed that “Morris’ is the first Utopia which is not utopian,” and the many citations of this judgement—for example by Tom Moylan, Ruth Levitas and Marcus Waithe—make it an increasingly familiar one, and an appropriate place to begin a discussion of how we should understand Nowhere. The aphoristic statement gets to the heart of the questions that News from Nowhere (1890) has presented to its generations of readers. Is this to be taken as the utopia that we should all desire? And if a de-industrialised and non-commercial land of contented labour does not appeal, does that indicate a difference of “temperament” between oneself and Morris, or does William Guest’s expulsion from Nowhere at the end of the text reflect authorial unease as to how effectively men and women mired in capitalism at the fin de siècle can really imagine the conditions of emancipation? The passage in Morton’s The English Utopia (1952) goes on to explain his basis for the distinction:

In all its predecessors it is the details which catch our attention, but here, while
we may be dubious about this detail or that, the important things are the sense of
historical development and the human understanding of the quality of life in a
classless society.\textsuperscript{38}

Morton presumably has in mind the chapter “How the Change Came,” and is thus drawing
attention to the plausibility, or at least the seriousness, of the account of how the violent
suppression of protests in Trafalgar Square led to the transformation of industrial capitalism
and exploited labour into a communist society in which money and forced work are unknown.
As he points out, this utopia is different from those remote lands and islands where alternative
societies are traditionally sited, for we are shown that it is this country, this society, projected
into the future, but overlaid upon the same terrain of London.

This might seem a sensible or obvious statement about the ‘novel’.\textsuperscript{39} It is also a claim
that is central to the interpretation of News from Nowhere as a roadmap for the realised
socialism of tomorrow—an implication that I wish to contest and one that Morris himself
seems to forestall in his lectures and essays, for example when he wrote with E. Belfort Bax
that “it is impossible to build up a scheme for the society of the future, for no man can really
think himself out of his own days.”\textsuperscript{40} There has been a growing trend in Morris scholarship to
identify Nowhere as “not utopian” in a different sense from Morton’s, and rather as a
representation of a society which contains within it certain irritants that undermine the
pastoral calm of the novel and which suggest that it “is to some extent aware […] that too
much may have been sacrificed.”\textsuperscript{41} Other critics have made similar observations on the non-
utopian content of Nowhere, and recent examination seems to make this quality increasingly
central to interpretations of the text.\textsuperscript{42} For the most part, these essays imply that Nowhere
operates in part as a thought exercise, a reading which tends to neutralise its temporal
dynamic (Morton’s “historical development”). In this section, I propose that these readings,
sensitive as they are to the disturbing itch that characterises Guest’s presence in Nowhere,

\textsuperscript{38} Morton, The English Utopia, 213 (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{39} The category of novel may not be the right one for Morris’s text; Patrick Brantlinger, James Buzard
and Tony Pinkney have all identified ways in which it resists or opposes the category (Patrick Brantlinger,
Buzard, “Ethnography as Interruption: ‘News from Nowhere,’ Narrative, and the Modern Romance of
Authority,” Victorian Studies 40, no. 3 (April 1, 1997): 445–474; Tony Pinkney, “Versions of Ecotopia in
News from Nowhere,” in William Morris in the Twenty-First Century, ed. Phillippa Bennett and Rosie
\textsuperscript{40} William Morris and E. Belfort Bax, Socialism, Its Growth & Outcome (London: Swan Sonnenschein &
Co., 1893), 17.
\textsuperscript{41} Pinkney, “Versions of Ecotopia in News from Nowhere,” 105.
\textsuperscript{42} Krishan Kumar, “News from Nowhere: The Renewal of Utopia,” History of Political Thought 14, no. 1
(1993): 133–143; Buzard, “Ethnography as Interruption”; Waithe, “News from Nowhere, Utopia and
Bakhtin’s Idyllic Chronotope”; Pinkney, “Versions of Ecotopia in News from Nowhere.”
miss the historical dimension to Morris’s reservations about his utopian society. It is in Nowhere’s curious suspension of history, and the cautious fascination that its unhistorical habitants have for the nineteenth century, that the text’s alternate-historical qualities emerge: it is like the England we know, and even functions as a projection of political and aesthetic desires of English socialists (more precisely, Morris himself) in the nineteenth century, but stands apart as belonging to a different order of historical consciousness. The novel serves as a map of utopian London, with its slums cleared and its architecture improved; but Morris, I argue, makes us conscious that this is a map (or a tapestry) which he himself has drawn or embroidered, and which calls into question that process of historical development that readers of the novel have returned to again and again. This interpretation allows us to recognise an anxiety that afflicts the citizens of Nowhere, and us as readers: that we will not be able to conceive of a society that can no longer remember the circumstances from which it became liberated. It will pass beyond the imaginative capacities of the socialists of the nineteenth century, and Nowhere’s imminent inability to remember its own history will plunge it back into the lamentable conditions of the past. Both the Nowhereans and Guest are dreaming—and need to be able to dream—the map of the other society. Morris’s awareness of Nowhere as a dream of the nineteenth-century present is what makes News from Nowhere an alternate history in the critical-reflexive mode.

“Divided Against Ourselves”

Another dream novel by Morris, A Dream of John Ball (published 1886-67 in The Commonweal and as a novel in 1888), contains similar temporal complexities and a similar preoccupation with the limits of (imagining) communication between two historical periods. These limits are foregrounded in the chapter “Hard it is for the Old World to see the New,” which contains the long conversation between the narrator and John Ball at dawn in a deserted church on the morning when the Peasants’ Revolt will fail. John Ball says to the visitor from the nineteenth century, “‘in some way that I cannot name, thou knowest more than we; as though with thee the world had lived longer than with us’.”43 The narrator, knowing the fate that awaits John Ball, seems bound by a law of non-disclosure: “‘Only this may I tell thee’. ”44 This is precisely the moment when, if this were a modern alternate history (one incorporating time-travelling socialists), the narrator would give John Ball the information that would allow the revolt to become successful. Instead, Morris is more interested in the difficulties of communication that are associated with something like a mutual need between the present

44 Morris, A Dream of John Ball, XVI:285.
and the past. Both await the day when “’men [shall] see things as they verily are’,”\textsuperscript{45} but to pursue this goal the men and women of the nineteenth century require the examples and energies that become accessible through the study of history; symmetrically, the insurrectionary movements of the past requires a level of insight and understanding that they do not yet possess. But as parties on both sides can only imagine the other, their conversations can only occur in the diaphanous twilight of the church, where each is mysterious to the other; they are, to use John Ball’s words, “‘enchanted by the gleam of the moon and the glamour of the dreamtide’.”\textsuperscript{46}

Morris emphasises the temporal complications associated with such imaginary time-travelling from the outset: before returning to medieval Kent, the narrator reflects upon the architectural landscape of his dreams, “an architectural peep-show” made up of buildings from different historical periods existing in eclectic but pleasant company with each other and which are “untouched by the degradation of the sordid utilitarianism that cares not and knows not of beauty and history.”\textsuperscript{47} These latter terms are tellingly unyoked from each other: Morris does not refer to the beauty of history, nor the beauty to be found in history. Their articulation takes place in the sensibility (or “temperament”) of the individual who dreams the historical past. The narrator describes falling asleep and finding himself in a well-managed countryside in springtime. Soon after his arrival in the 1380s, and gaining entry into the peasant rebellion by involuntarily responding with the correct shibboleth (which is the second line of a couplet), he meets with a group of rebels who are holding a banner, on which is

\begin{quote}
\textit{a picture of a man and woman half-clad in skins of beasts seen against a background of green trees, the man holding a spade and the woman a distaff and spindle rudely done enough, but yet with a certain spirit and much meaning; and underneath this symbol of the early world and a man’s first contest with nature were the written words:

\textit{When Adam delved and Eve span,}

\textit{Who was then the gentleman?}}\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

This ekphrastic image corresponds to the drawing by Edward Burne-Jones that stood as the frontispiece to the 1888 edition of the novel, and which included Morris’s typographical arrangement of John Ball’s celebrated rhyme. The image seems to have three authors: Burne-Jones, the peasants themselves, but also William Morris for placing it in their imagined hands.

\textsuperscript{45} Morris, \textit{A Dream of John Ball}, XVI:285.
\textsuperscript{46} Morris, \textit{A Dream of John Ball}, XVI:285.
\textsuperscript{47} Morris, \textit{A Dream of John Ball}, XVI:215.
\textsuperscript{48} Morris, \textit{A Dream of John Ball}, XVI:227–28.
As Stephen F. Eisenman points out, this produces a complex historicity, one which renders the engraving “in fact a kind of ironic forgery.”\footnote{Stephen F. Eisenman, “Communism in Furs: A Dream of Prehistory in William Morris’s ‘John Ball,’” \textit{The Art Bulletin} 87, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 104.} It implies, Eisenman explains, that the rebels of 1381 possessed the sophisticated historical sense of the late-nineteenth-century political theorists, and were participating in the anthropological debate about the origins of politics in the earliest societies. Eisenman interprets the banner, and \textit{A Dream of John Ball}, as Morris’s assertion that communism was indigenous to England.\footnote{Eisenman, “Communism in Furs,” 93.} Furthermore, the peasants are somehow anticipating the legacy of their rebellion—the labourers and unemployed who will march in nineteenth-century rallies in Britain.\footnote{Eisenman, “Communism in Furs,” 104.} Toward the end of the novel when, prohibited as he is from revealing John Ball’s fate, the narrator says that “‘in those days shall it be seen that thou hast not wrought for nothing, because thou hast seen beforehand what the remedy should be, even as those of later days have seen it’.”\footnote{Morris, \textit{A Dream of John Ball}, XVI:277.} The affinities with \textit{The Wondrous Tale of Alroy} should be self-evident: we again see an artistic creation that is inserted into the past in order to look forward, and are encouraged to believe that this retroactively applied legacy becomes available for men and women of the future to inherit.

Contestation regarding the origins of the present is not, in itself, an alternate-historical practice. Anna Vaninskaya comments on the nineteenth-century interpretation of the peasants’ revolt that it “appeared at all levels of historical production: from the most amateur
to the most professional,” and that “to read the Revolt in the nineteenth century was to become part of an ongoing project of historical reconstruction.”\(^{53}\) Where Morris is participating in an alternate-historical mode of reflection, is in the reflexivity of his historical consciousness, which attaches itself to the aesthetic objects and the way in which they appear in his historical narratives. The banner is an example of how Morris is capable of investing a particular image with a double history, capable of standing in two historical periods simultaneously and shuttling backward and forward through time, inflecting both. The same insertion of nineteenth-century decoration into the past occurs in News from Nowhere, in a moment to which Patrick Brantlinger has drawn attention. Early in the novel, when Guest has barely oriented himself in the twenty-first century, he notices an architectural frieze, “very well executed, and designed with a force and directness which I had never noticed in modern work before.”\(^{54}\) Brantlinger is interested in the familiarity that the design has for Guest: “The subjects I recognised at once, and indeed was very particularly familiar with them.”\(^{55}\) Brantlinger’s claim is that art freed from capitalism will return to myth, to archetypes, and would not require any special education: “even strangers can understand them on first sight.”\(^{56}\) I would propose a very different reading; that Guest is “very particularly familiar with them” because, similarly to the image of Adam and Eve, they are objects of design work that Morris recognises because they are his own. This indicates not only the identity of Guest as an authorial persona, but Morris’s recognition that this utopia is “the expression of the temperament of its author.” This reflexivity qualifies the future-historical setting of Nowhere and makes the relationship of the present to Nowhere one which is spatial and ideational (which become more clear at Trafalgar Square, as I discuss below). Rather than interpreting the novel as more or less plausible as a future society—or realistic as a rendering of the past—we should consider the aestheticisation of history in Morris’s hands.

One nineteenth-century commentator who was acutely perceptive toward Morris’s sophisticated historicism is Walter Pater, whose famous “Conclusion” to Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873) had first been published as part of a review article in 1868 of William Morris’s poems. It is the aesthetic effect that can be produced in literature when an art form reaches back toward its antecedents that Pater appreciates in Morris, commenting that the reiteration of an ideal first expressed in medieval poetry produces a transformed version of the original values:


\(^{55}\) Morris, News From Nowhere, XVI:13–14.

\(^{56}\) Brantlinger, “News from Nowhere,” 44.
It is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal. Like some strange second flowering after date, it renews on a more delicate type the poetry of a past age, but must not be confounded with it.\textsuperscript{57} These astute critical judgements on the early poetry describe the self-awareness that Morris himself would practise in the later, more reflexive dream novels. Pater, in the same essay, writes of the personal experience of past cultures that although “it is possible to isolate such a phase, to throw it into relief, to be divided against ourselves in zeal for it, as we may hark back to some choice space of our own individual life.”\textsuperscript{58} Pater is addressing here the special attachment that one may have for a passage of historical time, and suggesting that this special attachment, or “zeal,” operates like a mirror, so that we recognise, or discover, our own qualities in that longing perception of the historical past. In this moment of recognition we catch ourselves, as if in a mirror, and become two people: the longing subject and the reflexive one. These moments of intense recognition span distances of space and time and the synthetic character of their productions is fundamental. Morris presents us with a paradigm of historical interpretation as the renovation of vision that results from the creative recognition of affinity between historical periods. This model approximates to Walter Benjamin’s historical materialism, and describes Foucault’s interpretation of the heterotopias of the nineteenth century, of which the mirror is one trope: “It makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal.”\textsuperscript{59}

The connections between Pater’s aesthetic philosophy and Morris’s decorative historiography would require further consideration than the scope of this thesis allows. The point to make here is that Pater understands that Morris’s aestheticisation of history is the result of a “zeal” for a past period, and that what such enthusiasm produces is an artistic production of the past which “must not be confounded with it.” Pater’s comments regard the aesthetic relation of Morris’s early poetry to the historical periods in which it is set, and as Regenia Gagnier has pointed out, “what is often forgotten is that [Morris’s] passion to produce beautiful things was coupled with the study of history.”\textsuperscript{60} This interpenetration of the aesthetic and the historical provides an explanation of the divisions that exist between Morris’s visitors from the nineteenth century and the inhabitants of the societies in which they arrive. These visits are not along a chronological continuum but rather the embroidered simulation of history—an aesthetic production whose relation to the present is one of decorative

\textsuperscript{58} Pater, “Poems by William Morris,” 307 (emphasis added).  
\textsuperscript{59} Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 232.  
\textsuperscript{60} Regenia Gagnier, Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920, Language, discourse, society (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 162.
subjectivity, mapped onto space rather than time. The separation that divides us from history is one which imaginary travel to the past can only appear to traverse, and Morris alerts us to the embroidered nature of his historical settings, which show themselves to be such. The model of alternate history is therefore critical-reflexive, and the critique is directed toward the romantic-utopian impulses that are on display in Morris’s own literary works. Morris does not attempt to change the past as a time traveller might, for the past is as unreachable for him as it is for Blanqui, who exclaims: “Here is the terrible thing! One cannot be warned.”

This must affect our reception of Morris’s utopian portrayals, anticipated at the end of *A Dream of John Ball* as the moment “when men shall have the fruits of the earth and the fruits of their toil thereon, without money and without price,” and later depicted as fulfilled labour under socialism in *News from Nowhere*. I have suggested that there is a division between Morris’s subjective-aesthetic treatment of the past in his poetry and novels, and his role as a good socialist in his lectures and essays. But this separation is occasionally porous; his later essays reveal a more subjective approach to history, for example when he writes together with Bax of “dreams of the life of the past, which themselves cannot fail to be more or less unsubstantial imaginings.” Equally, *A Dream of John Ball* is able to comment on the limitations of socialist orthodoxy as a historical science, and dwell instead on the enchantment of the past—“the gleam of the moon and the glamour of the dreamtide.” It is through these subjective historical alignments that history becomes alive for the present, and does not degrade into what modern capitalist relations threaten it to be—“inconsequent nonsense.”

*News from Nowhere* subscribes to the romantic historiographical position that the past can be reanimated, but its alternate-historical stance is more nuanced, for it recognises that reanimation to be an illusion, but one which is creative and opens up the present for reinterpretation.

**Nowhere, Anywhere**

*News from Nowhere* occupies such an important place in British utopian literature that it has generated its own back-story and antecedents (not least Jefferies’s *After London*), and its relationship with these precursors now requires attention if we are to understand “where” or “when” Nowhere should be sited. The text is most often placed in relation to Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1887), a novel whose sensational success and influence on

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both sides of the Atlantic has been documented. Morris’s impassioned denial of Bellamy’s blueprint for “State Communism” in a review published in *Commonweal* in 1889 certainly supports a view that *News from Nowhere* was an alternative vision of the socialist future. The essential criticism of Bellamy’s better society, envisioned as “machine-life,” is of its failure to imagine work as “happy labour”—and this seems to be an essential characteristic of Morris’s *Nowhere*. Likewise, Morris devotes a large amount of the article to disagreeing with Bellamy’s proposition that a change would come about “by means of the final development of the great private monopolies,” and “the great change” would occur “peaceably and fatalistically.” Morris’s chapter “How the Change Came” provides an alternative version of how emancipation from monopoly capitalism would need to be effected (through organised and determined protest and the failure of its violent suppression). Nonetheless, Morris’s criticisms of Bellamy create the misleading impression that *News from Nowhere* is an equivalent, if rival, vision of a socialist future. I interpret Nowhere as always qualified by the awareness that utopias are formed from the historical, ethical and in Morris’s case the aesthetic values of their authors. In this sense it is a better and qualitatively different dream of the future, not least for being aware of itself as such. In this way it stands in much closer—more spatially proximate—relation to the London of the late nineteenth century than Bellamy’s anticipation of the technological solutions of the future. Its model is critical-reflexive, whereas *Looking Backward* belongs to the linear-chronological model of ‘remembering’ the past. It is through the overlaying of the present with past and future that *News from Nowhere* delivers its alternate-historical reflection, rather than the futurism of *Looking Backward*.

*After London* has also been cited as an influence upon *News from Nowhere*; Morton describes Jefferies’s text as “a *News from Nowhere* in reverse—capitalism indeed destroyed but no socialism to take its place,” going on to claim that “there is no doubt, I think, that it was among the influences that went to the final shaping of Morris’s Utopia.” The evidence of this relationship is two letters written by Morris to Georgiana Burne-Jones in April and May of 1885; in the first, he describes *After London* as “a queer book” and admits that “absurd hopes

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70 Matthew Beaumont has recently interrogated the conventional understanding of Bellamy’s utopia as a roadmap, in *The Spectre of Utopia*, by emphasising the disorientation and paranoia that result from attempting to dream the future.
curled round my heart as I read it.” The hopes are amplified in the second letter, which begins with dejected reflections on the state of his socialist “party” in Britain (“if I can dignify a little knot of men by such a word”). He anticipates the destruction of civilization and welcomes the return to primitive society: “how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies,” commenting that “happily, I know now that all that will have a sudden — sudden in appearance I mean— ‘as it was in the days of Noé’.” To introduce such a flood and imagine the formation of a socialist society would be to retread the alternate-historical format of Jefferies’s novella, but this is not the pattern of News from Nowhere.

The diluvial imagery suggests that Morris still has After London in mind. News from Nowhere does not, however, spring from this retributive impulse: Morris stays his hand from delivering Old-Testament punishment and Nowhere is an enlightened, not benighted society. He reprises themes from After London in a different way elsewhere, for when he talks about the endangerment of freedoms won in Britain in a lecture on “Art and Socialism” (1884), he repeats the same idea of recovering the values of the past that Jefferies voiced in his echoes of the Gettysburg Address. Morris exclaims “Ah! my friends, it is but a poor tribute to offer on the tombs of the martyrs of liberty, this refusal to take the torch from their dying hands!” Like Matthew Arnold and Thomas Babington Macaulay before him, Morris attaches positive value to the sack of Rome by the Barbarians, for “that fury bore with it things long strange to Rome, which once had been the food its glory fed on”; in other words, the idea of progress depends on an understanding of historical progress as “the spiral […] and not the straight line,” which I take to be a statement of dialectical history, in which Roman society, for example, required the Teutonic overthrow in order for their achievements to be regenerated and perpetuated. In “Art and Socialism,” Morris is able to make a claim which encapsulates the transformation of After London into News from Nowhere’s exemplary vision of the future: “this tale of the past is a parable of the days to come; of the change in store for us hidden in the breast of the Barbarism of civilization—the proletariat.”

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76 Morris, “Art and Socialism,” 122.
77 William Morris, Art and its Producers, and The Arts and Crafts of Today: Two Addresses delivered before the National Association for the Advancement of Art (London: Longmans & Co., 1901), 43.
78 Morris, “Art and Socialism,” 122. It should be clear that the term “Barbarian” is here transvalued, as it was by other historians and commentators such as Macaulay and Matthew Arnold.
One final affinity between Morris’s celebrated utopia and Jefferies’s vision of post-apocalyptic England is worth noting, for it raises a possible source for the name of “Nowhere” that has so far been overlooked—at least to my knowledge. In the “Art and Socialism” essay, Morris recounts a remark made by Goethe as a stimulus to action *here and now:*

> Is it not of Goethe it is told, that on hearing one say he was going to America to begin life again, he replied, ‘Here is America, or nowhere!’ So for my part I say, ‘Here is Russia, or nowhere.’

Morris takes up the point a little later, further exhorting his audience: “So on all sides I can offer you a position which involves sacrifice; a position which will give you your ‘America’ at home.” This idea of making a version of the newly united and federated America in Britain, of fashioning that historical trajectory and democratic space in another country, is an idea that Morris shares with Jefferies—and this essay pre-empts *After London* by a year. America, perhaps also infused with zeal, becomes Europe’s utopian destiny. Morris’s provision of a dark counterpart to Goethe’s invocation to make one’s life here brings the remark within the field of utopian thought by suggesting that just as America—with attendant ideas of freedom and potential—must be made here, there is likewise a dystopian society—that of Russia’s abuses of power and society of enslavement—if we do not honour and defend the achievements of the past. Morris also echoes the recuperative historiography of Lincoln when he admonishes: “If we hang back we make their labours, their sufferings, their deaths of no account.”

Morris’s use of Goethe’s remark does more than echo other texts, however; it makes it possible to think of “Nowhere” in a sense other than as a translation of one half of the meaning of “utopia.” (We are reminded by Ruth Levitas and others that “utopia” contains both the prefixes “ou” and “eu.”) But the implication in Goethe’s use of “Nowhere” and Morris’s citation of this use is that another society (better or worse) can be fashioned in the present time and place. This brings Morris’s utopia into a spatial and immanent relation to this society, like Jefferies’s historical vision of a redeemed city from Trafalgar Square, which can be overlaid upon the terrain of our own society in the manner of a the map in Lewis Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno* (1893), in which the country is used as the map of itself. Nowhere is Anywhere, and therefore here. Morris’s treatment is more critical and self-aware for the way that it alternates between variant visions of a specific location, compared to Jefferies’s descriptions of moments when spaces in the unredeemed city become transformed and transcended, to provide experience of fulfilled life.

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79 Morris, “Art and Socialism,” 131. Morris would probably have encountered this statement, originally in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship,* in *Marius the Epicurean,* where it is quoted.  
80 Morris, “Art and Socialism,” 132.  
Guest arrives at Trafalgar Square before he meets with Hammond and is told “How the Change Came.” That change toward the society of Nowhere has been precipitated by the violent suppression of an imagined demonstration at Trafalgar Square in 1952, an even more brutal suppression than the events of “Bloody Sunday” that Morris had witnessed himself in 1887. In the anticipated uprising, the police have turned “mechanical guns” upon the peaceful crowd. Morris may have been incorporating the memory of the “Peterloo” massacre of 1819. As in A Dream of John Ball, historical events are fused together in a unifying perception of the struggles that characterise a Marxist reception of history.

Guest does not recognise the site at first, for the landmarks of the nineteenth century have been mostly obliterated. The realisation of where he is takes on the quality of a hallucination in which multiple moments of historical time are experienced simultaneously.

A strange sensation came over me; I shut my eyes to keep out the sight of the sun glittering on this fair abode of gardens, and for a moment there passed before them a phantasmagoria of another day. A great space surrounded by tall ugly houses, with an ugly church at the corner and a nondescript ugly cupolaed building at my back; the roadway thronged with a sweltering and excited crowd, dominated by omnibuses crowded with spectators. In the midst a paved be-fountained square, populated only by a few men dressed in blue, and a good many singularly ugly bronze images (one on the top of a tall column). The said square guarded up to the edge of the roadway by a four-fold line of big men clad in blue, and across the southern roadway the helmets of a band of horse-soldiers, dead white in the greyness of the chilly November afternoon—

I opened my eyes to the sunlight again and looked round, and cried out among the whispering trees and odorous blossoms, ‘Trafalgar Square!’

This is not the only time in the text where we experience the intrusion of the misery of the nineteenth century, but it is the most striking, the most forcefully compressed and the most dramatically experienced as revelation. David Skilton uses the term “hypnagogia” to describe the phantasmagorical type of vision that conditions the experience of population density and which characterises the renditions of urban space in Wordsworth and Jefferies (the latter’s transformation of crowds into cosmic, geometric streams). The term, which refers to the

83 Morris, News From Nowhere, XVI:103. These, if interpreted as automatic weapons, are one of the novel’s rare pieces of technological anticipation.

84 Morris, News From Nowhere, XVI:41–42. Unlike Jefferies, Morris does not seem to be particularly moved by the lions.

state between waking and sleep, is especially descriptive of those moments in News from Nowhere where two (or more) times are envisioned in the same moment. For there are three points of time involved in this moment of perception. When Morris describes “the said square” with the policemen approaching from the South on a November afternoon, this functions as a reference to the demonstrations of 1887. But the “said square” at the moment of confrontation with the police is also a foreshadowing of the events of 1952, described by Hammond much later in the novel, when the square is again occupied by demonstrators: “another column of soldiers [...] marched up, pushing the crowd into a denser and denser mass, and formed along the south side of the Square.”

1952 is the novel’s anticipated point of historical departure from capitalism; it is the time when the demonstrators do not repeat history by fleeing or being overwhelmed and dispersed. Instead, they remain and are massacred with guns, precipitating a process of change toward utopia.

This makes Guest’s exclamation “Trafalgar Square!” temporally very complex: the setting is in the redeemed future, the recognition is of the desolate past of the nineteenth century, and the effect of juxtaposing the failures of the nineteenth-century present day (represented as the past) from the perspective of a liberated future, is to delineate and make conceivable the transformation from one to the other through another insurrection upon the same site. The force of the passage lies in the identity of utopia with this world, and I read the novel very differently from Krishan Kumar, who asserts that “what Morris wishes to convey is the experience of being in a new world.”

In this flash of recognition, enabled by unity of place, three dated moments become synchronous—a suspension of history but also an alignment of historical time. Hammond describes the pause before the massacre: “It seemed as if the end of the world had come, and today seemed strangely different from yesterday.”

Morris wishes, through an elaborate series of temporal, self-conscious and alternate-historical realignments, to open up new perceptions of his own “today.”

**Nowhere’s Historical Horizon: Representing Utopia**

The term “rest” in the novel has attracted attention, and is also the subject of a provocative typographical error, for the full title of the novel in the Collected Works is given as News from Nowhere; or, An Epoch of Unrest: Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance

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86 Morris, *News From Nowhere*, XVI:115 (emphasis added). “Another,” I am suggesting, refers both to another column on that day, and the repetition of previous events.


(emphasis added). Marcus Waithe has described this error as “remarkable both for its prominence and its descriptive accuracy.” It also seems to me an opportune entry point for thinking about how history operates as—to borrow a spatial figure from other readers, and from *The Count of Monte Cristo*—a “horizon” of representability in Nowhere. So far my analysis has been restricted to considering how the past can be only subjectively, though instructively, apprehended. In this final section on Morris, I will show how the dissonant relations between Guest and his hosts in Nowhere intimate that a liberated future society will revert to the conditions of the nineteenth century; and that Morris asserts the ongoing need to interpret and rearrange the past—to exercise the alternate-historical spirit—in order to maintain the necessary imagination of a better future.

Critics have drawn attention to the discomfiture that attends Guest—the “evil charm” that he carries with him. Marcus Waithe describes him as a vandalising force that exposes Nowhere’s “vulnerability to desecration.” James Buzard presents Guest as a virus-ridden ethnographer who threatens the rest of the Nowhereans; who “can salvage the culture of the future only by getting out of it.” The particular virus Buzard attributes to Guest is Historical knowledge in a society whose restfulness lies in its freedom from memory, a society for whom “there is no such thing as history.” Morris takes pains to make this clear to us: the study of History is seen as the old-fashioned habit of men such as Hammond and Morsom. But the past is also half-remembered as containing its own pleasures, not least literature. Of novels, Ellen says that “there is a spirit of adventure in them, and signs of a capacity to extract good out of evil which our literature quite lacks now.” These pleasures, hovering on the edge of memory, force us to consider the consequences of their disappearance in the longed-for utopia—which Tony Pinkney describes as the high price of utopia. An important insight of Buzard’s is to question what the future holds for this utopian society, for “when the likes of Hammond and Morsom finally die—these men so much identified with the temporal order of language and writing—the last trace of narratable time may go with them, since time for the rest of the utopians is [...] an empty, geological medium of horizonless futurity.”

These consequences, this fate, are the conditions of utopia that problematise its representation along a historical trajectory. Morris brings these complications to the fore

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89 Waithe, *News from Nowhere*, Utopia and Bakhtin’s Idyllic Chronotope,” 472n.
91 Waithe, *News from Nowhere*, Utopia and Bakhtin’s Idyllic Chronotope,” 470.
93 Buzard, “Ethnography as Interruption,” 452.
94 Hammond may indeed be Morris himself, for Guest says of him that it was “as if I had seen it before—in a looking-glass it might be” (53).
when Hammond reflects on the loss of memory. He and Guest are watching the May Day commemorations, whose origins are on the cusp of oblivion; young women sing revolutionary songs on the sites in London’s East End where the greatest suffering was experienced. Hammond’s affirmation of this historical and social advance—that the suffering of the past has become inconceivable—is one which is difficult to agree with wholeheartedly, not only because we still possess that historical sensibility that Foucault attributed to the nineteenth century, but also because Morris’s imagination of utopia is itself so dependent on ideas of historical legacy and development.

‘To hear the terrible words of threatening and lamentation coming from her sweet and beautiful lips, and she unconscious of their real meaning: to hear her, for instance, singing Hood’s Song of the Shirt, and to think that all the time she does not understand what it is all about—a tragedy grown inconceivable to her and her listeners. Think of that, if you can, and of how glorious life is grown!’

The doubt that we feel toward this endorsement of social progress that involves the loss of history is surely built into the novel as a whole, and this passage in particular: the ambiguous syntax after the dash makes is unclear to what idea “tragedy” is attached, and seems deliberate. Guest’s answer, that “it is difficult for me to think of it” is pointedly equivocal also. The historicity of Nowhere is about to become one in which there is no history at all—and Morris is surely entertaining a moment of pause here, in which the realisation of socialism, its contented labour and (almost complete) freedom from sorrow, becomes one which we are not capable of fully endorsing (implied in Hammond’s “if you can”) for we realise that the men and women of the nineteenth century have no place at all in such a society. History was also forgotten in After London, and tied up with its barbarism. Jefferies made this undesirable forgetfulness a precondition for the imagination of a different and better historical trajectory, but in News from Nowhere it is this lack of historical knowledge which establishes the danger of historical return, one to the ‘barbarism’ of the late nineteenth century. It is the study and remembrance of the past which makes possible a better alternative future.

Matthew Beaumont’s reading of News from Nowhere draws upon Ernst Bloch’s notions of the “not-yet-conscious” and anticipatory apprehension of a utopian future as “forward dawning” to arrive at the position that “[utopias] are less about the future (as a distinct category in opposition to the past) than they are about the outer limit or horizon of the present.” Thus, for Beaumont, utopian writing can serve as a technique for visualising the opaque contours of the present by imagining a future perspective from which the present is

98 Morris, News From Nowhere, XVI:66.
“transparent.”100 We are still left with the troubling discomfort of Guests’s visit to Nowhere: the dangers of historical forgetfulness, and Ellen’s final judgement that “‘No, it will not do; you cannot be of us’.”101 My claim is that Nowhere represents “the outer limit or horizon of the present,” to repeat Beaumont’s phrase, but in the sense that the future can be imagined only up to the point where it still remembers the past that extends its desires into the future. Nowhere is the forward projection of the hopes of the nineteenth century, enabled by the re-imagination of the past. Wells would devise an invention for crossing between these worlds, and in doing so turn the imagination of other historical trajectories into a different category.

III. Wells and the “Scientific Romance”

H. G. Wells’s “scientific romances” and anticipations of future social organisations were influenced by and were responses to William Morris’s utopian socialism, with the Eloi meant to parody the citizens of Nowhere.102 When the narrator of The Time Machine (1895) remarks on seeing the living conditions of these simple-minded creatures, his interpretation of their society is expressed in the single word: “Communism.”103 Wells himself would explicitly describe his Modern Utopia as a correction of Morris’s vision, which is relegated to the period “before Darwin quickened the thought of the world.”104 Evolutionary theory is manifestly crucial to his early and celebrated novella The Time Machine, providing as it does the basis for the species devolution and segregation that the time traveller discovers when he arrives in the year 802,701. Nicholas Ruddick suggests that this date contains an oblique reference to another scientific concept, that of entropy, in which the regression of the two three-digit numbers that make up the date implies the steady diminution of life, heat and culture (“humanity on the wane”105) that awaits the future of the planet: 802, 701, 600, etc.106 Despite the temporal ambiguity of the novella (we seem to be travelling forward in time while regressing as a species), it represents the end-of-century subordination of literary representations of alternative societies to a linear chronology, one which moves along a fixed continuum between the earth’s past and its specifically dated futures to which the dial of the time machine is set. This also characterises Wells’s science fiction more generally; he makes a telling comment in the Preface to the 1921 edition of The Sleeper Awakes, but which applies to his scientific romances of the future in general, when he writes: “‘Suppose these forces to go

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103 Wells, The Time Machine, 29.
104 Wells, A Modern Utopia, 4.
on’, that is the fundamental hypothesis of the story.”

This historical linearity (time “going on”) connects the fiction and non-fiction of Wells with the third of the three modes of alternate history that I have identified throughout this thesis, and is in contrast to the other two. As explained in the introduction to this chapter, I am making the claim that this typology of alternate history describes patterns of historical apprehension that operate until the late-century, at which point SF “proper” asserts a linear logic to history and its imagined outcomes which relegates romantic-utopian and critical-reflexive literary representations of historical otherness to obsolescence. From this point onwards, alternate history (though not critical historiography in general) is transformed into the positing of historical counterfactuals with their equally linear historical trajectories.

“I did not know yet how far they had forgotten the human heritage I ascribed them,” Wells writes in The Island of Doctor Moreau (1896), a story he would later describe as “an exercise in youthful blasphemy.” Development is a concept that functions at multiple levels within the texts. There is not only the permeating preoccupation with the development of the species and western civilization (on which I comment below), but what has attracted less attention is the way that realisation gradually dawns upon the narrators of his tales, whose understanding of their environments develops during each story. Here, Charles Prendick has stumbled upon the creations of Doctor Moreau, a disgraced vivisectionist who has fled the ethical and regulatory constraints of France and western science in order to conduct awful evolutionary experiments on animals. Prendick’s first assumption is that these are primitive men and women, although “their skins were of a dull pinkish colour, such as I had seen in no savages before.” The horrific truth is that Moreau’s experiments involve the acceleration and modification of the species development of animals, made possible by the quasi-divine powers that science extends to mankind. Moreau explains: “Then I took a gorilla I had, and upon that, working with infinite care, and mastering difficulty after difficulty, I made my first man.”

Until this revelation, however, Prendick is under the misapprehension that these creatures are examples of regressed humanity, rather than artificially advanced animals. This reflects contemporary fears of degeneration, popularised by Max Nordau and others. Prendick’s later perception of the the massed humanity of cities is coloured by the time spent

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110 Wells, Doctor Moreau, 39.
111 Wells, Doctor Moreau, 73.
112 Ruddick is among critics who have cited T. H. Huxley’s lecture on “Evolution and Ethics” as an important source for Wells (“Tell Us All about Little Rosebery,” 344.
with Moreau’s creations: after a period of time on the island, Prendick watches a placid cowman and describes “trying hard to recall, how he differed from some really human yokel trudging home from his mechanical labours; or I would meet the Fox-Bear Woman’s vulpine shifty face, strangely human in its speculative cunning, and even imagine I had met it before in some city byway.” The experience is not purely observational, for on his return to civilization, he comments that “[I] too must have undergone strange changes. [...] I am told that even now my eyes have a strange brightness, a swift alertness of movement.” ‘Change happens’ seems to be the message grotesquely expressed in Wells’s early novel, whether through individual human intervention, or through the contingent effects of changes to human society such as urban concentration and technological modernisation. The book finishes with another possibility of change, however, one that might be arrived at through seclusion from rough humanity and into the cloisters of reason. Prendick leaves the city and finds solace “surrounded by wise books, bright windows in this life of ours lit by the shining souls of men.” This pattern of an escape from horror through reason brings the possibility of change that is planned rather than just what happens through time and misadventure.

The time traveller’s understanding of the misadventures that have formed the future society he visits is also revealed through gradual disclosure. This is one way in which The Time Machine distinguishes itself from previous genres of the utopian or voyage fiction, in which the visitor finds an interlocutor who is able to explain the workings and organisation of the new society. Instead, Patrick Parrinder writes, the time traveller “has to work everything out for himself by a process of conjecture and refutation—a crucial feature of The Time Machine, which does much to convey the sense of intellectual realism and authenticity.” This working-out is central to The Time Machine, and recalls Suvin’s definition of SF as “cognitive estrangement,” for the traveller has two puzzles to interpret: the organisation of the society of the Eloi and the Morlocks, and the historical process that brought this situation about; “how the change came,” to quote Morris. His first observations on arriving in Richmond in 802,701 are that individual households have given way to shared living in large halls, and that “there were no hedges, no signs of proprietary rights, no evidences of agriculture; the whole earth had become a garden.” He then begins a process of retrospective explanation which, in the

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115 Wells, Doctor Moreau, 82.
116 Wells, Doctor Moreau, 122. Wells is also sensitive to the effects of observation in The Time Machine, in which the traveller seems to have acquired some of the behaviour of the Morlocks: on returning to the late nineteenth century, the traveller demands mutton; “I’m starving for a bit of meat” (14).
117 Wells, Doctor Moreau, 129.
118 Patrick Parrinder, “‘News from Nowhere, the Time Machine’ and the Break-Up of Classical Realism,” Science Fiction Studies 3, no. 3 (November 1, 1976): 273.
119 Wells, The Time Machine, 30. This criticism of a society that lives in such a garden might be taken as the presentation of utopia, in Morris and elsewhere, through such a figure.
absence of any other perspective, we can only assume to be correct. Speaking with hindsight from the late nineteenth century, he observes that “there is a sentiment arising, and it will grow [...] against passion of all sorts” until it has produced “refined and pleasant life.” The future consequence, we are told, is “that restless energy, that with us is strength, would become weakness.” Evidence of this decline is first apparent in the character of the Eloi and their indolent lifestyle, then in the horrifying explanation of the mystery of “how things were kept going”. The Morlocks provide the material necessities for the Eloi in return for their flesh. The traveller discovers this in the manner of a scientist:

But, gradually, the truth dawns upon me: that Man had not remained one species, but had differentiated into two distinct animals: that my graceful children of the Upperworld were not the sole descendants of our generation but that this bleached, obscene, nocturnal Thing, which had flashed before me, was also heir to all the ages.

The idea of a species become soft and domesticated was not new. Robert Cromie, in A Plunge into Space (1890), had already presented the inhabitants of Mars as a race in decline, a process which is described here in language appropriate to Wells’s interests: “One look at a Martian’s face would convince the most obstinate sceptic that in them the animal had been suppressed and supplanted by the intellect.” The uncomplicated and unequivocal message of Cromie’s novel is that mankind needs to retain a rough and hardy element to its character, a message that is also present in E. M. Forster’s science-fiction story “The Machine Stops,” in which technological development has produced an over-refined civilization. The story opens with a description of a woman “about five feet high, with a face as white as a fungus.” Wells himself would—more or less seriously—propose that “The Man of the Year Million” (1893) would be relieved of the need to chew and digest his own food through a combination of technological enablement and evolutionary adaptation.

The Time Machine differs from these imaginations in that it presents a bifurcating future in which the proletariat have overcome their masters, leading to a society in which the social characteristics of both “species” have become hypertrophied. It is a comparable

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118 Wells, The Time Machine, 32.
120 Wells, The Time Machine, 41.
121 Wells, The Time Machine, 46 [emphasis added].
122 Robert Cromie, A Plunge into Space (London & New York: Frederick Warne & Co, 1890), 112.
124 H. G Wells, Journalism and Prophecy, 1893-1946 (London: Bodley Head, 1965), 6. This man would correspond, strikingly, to the aliens of recent popular mythology: “Eyes, large, lustrous, beautiful, soulful; [...] the top of the head, a glistening, hairless dome, terete and beautiful; [...] the mouth is a small, perfectly round aperture, toothless and gumless, jawless, unanimal.”
perspective to Morris’s, for both authors argue that the the qualities and culture of the labouring and the leisured classes need to be prevented from diverging and becoming segregated. But whereas Morris is presenting the positive benefits of a socialist revolution (despite the qualifying ironies), Wells offers a cautionary tale of what will happen if a proletarian revolution is successful: current social divisions will be exacerbated into a nightmare (in)version of the relationship. Matthew Beaumont discerns an ambiguity in Wells’s society of the Eloi and Morlocks, for he identifies two related didactic lessons in the novella: on the one hand it is a parody of Marx’s dream of government by the masses; on the other it is “on the same historical continuum as [Wells’s] own utopia of an enlightened elect.”

Beaumont presents the relationship of these two, very different, points in terms of his framework of the “historical uncanny,” whereby the imagination of the future contains unexpected and unwelcome implications; science fiction “intimates that an inchoate future is secretly gestating in the present—like the alien incubated in John Hurt’s body at the start of Ridley Scott’s Alien.” This approach recognises the horror element that resides within utopian desire, but I propose a different means of articulating the future dystopia of Eloi and Morlocks with what Beaumont identifies as Wells’s “emerging evolutionist vision of a society that is engineered and administered by a scientific elite”—and that is an alternate-historical proposition implicit in The Time Machine.

Put simply, Wells is suggesting that a choice exists for the social scientists of the late nineteenth century: they can allow social forces to run along their current trajectory (and produce the dystopia he anticipates); or they can take charge and design a programme for social development, which will lead to a better society that is protected from such horrors. Two alternative futures are on offer, it is for us to decide which to pursue. This, it may be said, falls outside the parameters of alternate history, for the “point of departure” is not in the past, but the nineteenth-century present. But the perspective from which this present-day is considered is in the future, which is to say that the present becomes the past, from which two alternatives are possible. Of course Wells has no special access to the future, and is only extrapolating what he identifies as patterns of social development: “‘Suppose these forces to go on’, that is the fundamental hypothesis of the story.” Within the altered physical laws of the story, a time traveller is able to return from the future with the authority of the ethnographer returning from the field, with data and interpretations that those of us stranded in the present are unable to question. Such reports from the future, in fiction, thus

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128 Wells, “Preface to The Sleeper Awakes,” 238.
manufacture the authority of empiricism. Authority is also implied in the way that Wells’s characters “discover” the truth of the environments and practices that they encounter; the gradual nature of their conclusions, informed by reason and evidence, adhere to the proper methods of the scientific researcher. This authority is precisely that which China Miéville takes issue with, one which “surrenders the terrain of supposed conceptual logic and rigour to the whims and diktats of a cadre of ‘expert’ author-functions.”

We can recognise the scientific ideology of Wells’s predictions, which is tied up both in the rigour of the protagonists’ analysis, and in the retrospective nature of Wells’s futurism in *The Time Machine*. The conclusion, which appears to be objectively arrived at, is that the undesirable future is not going to be the result of an accident or malevolent project, but things going on as they are, impelled by the adaptation of species (plural) to their increasingly industrial environment. The historical bifurcations are between the future that the time traveller has seen (which involves a nightmare of mankind’s own bifurcation), and a course of history not yet delineated, from which science will protect us: by presenting us with such future shocks and by directing the progress of society more wisely. Wells’s narrative introduces a new element into alternate history by making communication possible between the alternative, potential, futures and the present. The desire to travel between worlds is one he reveals in a review of George Macdonald’s *Lilith*: “Clearly once your born romancer has realized this infinite series of universes, his one desire is to invent a way into some of them.”

The difference between Wells and Morris should be understood in terms of the temporality of “development.” Morris offers Nowhere as the fulfilment of the promise and potential of the past— with the awareness that the present and past are linked and become visible to each other through the desire for political and social change that both attribute to the other. Historical repetition, of the right kind, is the formula for imagining utopia and for recognising the limits of representing it. For Wells, conversely, current history perceived through the lens of evolutionary theory becomes a sort of nightmare whose eventual repetition of former animal behaviours is the most likely outcome unless an intervention is carried out that directs the vagaries of evolutionary development toward a human telos. Wells is anxious about the future of a culture whose constituent elements cannot be properly synthesised. The location and character of utopia is thus transformed entirely, for Wells imagines it as an achievable society, to which the present stands not as an aberrant other, but as an essential waypoint toward that best society—the same Enlightenment belief in

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progressive history that Renouvier invoked alternate history to counter. Wells’s comments toward the end of *A Modern Utopia* (1905) make this clear:

> There will be many Utopias. Each generation will have its new version of Utopia, a little more certain and complete and real, with its problems lying closer and closer to the problems of the Thing in Being. Until at last from dreams Utopias will have come to be working drawings, and the whole world will be shaping the final World State, the fair and great and fruitful World State, that will only not be a Utopia because it will be this world.\(^{131}\)

Even the most imperfect of societies becomes utopia so long as it moves progressively toward the best achievable one. The parallel world that Wells creates in *A Modern Utopia* is, we are given to understand, one whose improvements are the result of design, enabled by centrally directed changes. Research is handed over to the military,\(^ {132}\) and financial dis/incentives control the distribution of global population: children are untaxed in zones given over to high population density, and taxed where land is meant to be preserved.\(^ {133}\) Members of the cadre that oversees and governs this global state are called “samurai,” and a series of ascetic prohibitions and obligations (the “great rule”) sets them apart and qualifies them to govern. Wells asserts the *historical* plausibility of this utopia (modern utopias must be “conceivably possible,” Wells has told us at the outset\(^ {134}\), and singles out Nowhere as exemplary of the tendency of traditional utopias to be ahistorical: “Most Utopias present themselves as going concerns, as happiness in being; they make it an essential conditions that a happy land can have no history.”\(^ {135}\) Morris’s historicisation of Nowhere was of course precisely the quality that A. L. Morton admired—and, as I have argued, Morris is acutely aware that the problem of representing utopia is a historiographical one. Wells has no such reservations about representing the future, even the end of the Earth, and that is because history becomes linear, accessible through the setting of a dial.

\(^{131}\) Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 258.

\(^{132}\) Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 42.

\(^{133}\) Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 35.

\(^{134}\) Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 5.

\(^{135}\) Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 94.
Wells’s “fourth dimension”

Wells likes to tell us both where and when we are. Nicholas Ruddick has observed the “strict unity of place” in *The Time Machine* against which the time machine’s calibrations precisely record the different dates travelled to, even if it is the death of Earth 30 million years after the nineteenth century. *A Modern Utopia* also reminds where we are throughout, whether it is on a duplicate Earth beyond Sirius, or back in the familiar world (the point of re-entry is Trafalgar Square). In “The Remarkable Case of Davidson’s Eyes” (1895), Wells inverts the relation between fixed location and variable time: after a laboratory accident, the unfortunate Davidson finds himself seeing from the perspective of the antipodes of his physical location. As he is led around daytime London, effectively blind, his phantasmal point of view simultaneously moves around an island off New Zealand at night. The explanation—a “kink in space,” brought about by electromagnetic forces—is certainly contrived, but reflects a method that persists throughout Wells’s writing: of isolating a single variant from the reality we recognise, whether it is the ability to become invisible, for sight to move beyond the body, or for time to become a dimension to be navigated. He explains this principle in the “Preface to *The Scientific Romances*,” where he says of the marvellous hypotheses of scientific romances, “the thing that makes such imaginations interesting is their translation into commonplace terms and the rigid exclusion of other marvels from the story.” This literary technique, of confining unreality to a single marvellous hypothesis while everything else happens as normal, seems to be both a distinctively British quality of SF, and also a pseudo-scientific one, for it follows the methodological demand in Science disciplines of isolating a single variable for an experiment. I say pseudo-scientific because in a story, the other variables are also hypothetical; but the effect is comparable to that authority and credibility that is extended to Wells’s narrators.

Wells’s time traveller wishes to situate both time and consciousness into the measurable character of space:

‘Really this is what is meant by the Fourth Dimension, though some people who talk about the Fourth Dimension do not know they mean it. [...] *There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it.*’

The suggestion that time is like the other dimensions may, like other of Wells’s hypotheses, be spurious; it did not impress all of his readers: Israel Zangwill commented that “in verity, there

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136 Ruddick, “Tell Us All about Little Rosebery,” 344.
138 Wells, “Preface to *The Scientific Romances*,” 241 (original emphasis).
is no Time Traveller, Mr. Wells, save Old Father Time himself.” The effect of Wells’s proposition, however, is to delimit historical alterity within the enlarged physical laws of the novel’s parameters. There is an alternate-historical trajectory—perceived in the past from the year 802,701—but it is one that can be foreclosed by returning to the present and choosing a different path which will negate that fate. This ability to choose brings alternate history much closer to counterfactual history-writing, and despite the future perspective, feels like social planning, which chimes with the programmatic character of Wellsian utopias. The historical alternative is no longer an ideational form, for it can never really be an other history, is always locked into a relationship with whatever present the time traveller happens to be in, passing along time like a bead in a groove. Wells wrote of The Time Machine in 1933 that it was stimulated by “the fairly obvious idea that events could be presented in a rigid four-dimensional space time framework that ran counter to the placid assumption that Evolution was a pro-human force making things better and better for mankind.” It is the rigidity of the novella’s framework that makes it such a departure from a literary form that operates in the romantic-utopian mode of Disraeli and Jefferies, or in the critical-reflexive mode of Morris and Blanqui. The alternatives are all locked into the physical laws of the novel’s space.

The “rigidity” that Wells uses to characterise both a principle of science-fiction presentation (“the rigid exclusion of other marvels from the story”) and the physical laws of The Time Machine (“a rigid four-dimensional space time framework”) is the quality that differentiates Wells’s novella from the romantic-utopian and critical-reflexive modes of alternate history in the nineteenth century, which found their final expression in After London and News from Nowhere. It is the rigidity of the dial that determines the time-settings to which one may travel, of the unquestionable character of the reports of Wells’s scientist-narrators, and of the programmatic nature of his utopian societies of the future. Its opposite, we might say, is the dream: non-physical, subjective and hallucinatory. The term “romance” which Jefferies, Morris and Wells all attached to their texts (prefixed with “scientific” for Wells) reflects an interrelationship between the three texts; but the diversity of their historical stances, which is discernible if we read them as alternate histories, helps us to recognise their sharp distinctions at a moment when a wider disciplinary and historiographical transition was in process. By making alternate history the lens through which these late-Victorian romance novels are scrutinised, we become aware of the tradition whose culmination is contained in these texts.

141 Wells, “Preface to The Scientific Romances,” 242–43.
Conclusion: Contingency

There are two principal claims in this thesis, both enabled by the division of nineteenth-century alternate histories into three modes: the romantic-utopian, critical-reflexive and linear-chronological. The first is that alternate history reflects but also complicates the transformation of historiographical thought toward a positivist model of historical interpretation (whose alternate-historical counterpart model is linear-chronological). The reflexive character of early nineteenth-century texts such as Historic Doubts (1819) and Napoléon et la conquête du monde (1836), with their ironic maps of counterfactual territories, belies any supposition that historiographical thought during the period moved more or less steadily and universally from a romantic, to a critical, to a positivist reception of history. Works such as After London (1885) illustrate the persistence of romantic historical notions, at least in literary works, through its figuration of the renovation of society as an overgrown garden. Besides these longitudinal comments about nineteenth-century historiography, assembling works of alternate history by historiographical orientation also produces an unexpected network of philosophers sceptical of the doctrine of history-as-progress in the early 1870s. We see that “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874), Nietzsche’s polemic against the complacent character of historical knowledge in Germany, had counterparts in Renouvier’s Uchronie (1871) and Louis Blanqui’s L’éternité par les astres (1872), which are comparable rejections of historical knowledge as an ever-accumulating body of evidence for human progress toward the best society. The divergent political allegiances of these three writers help to dissociate Nietzsche’s critique of historical knowledge from the cultural elitism he asserts elsewhere. More importantly, they all invoke the idea of history as repetition (though not in the romantic sense of recuperation), with more or less explicit invocations of the alternate-historical conceit as a means of liberating oneself from such complacent progressive assumptions; we thus see the importance of alternate history as a vehicle for historiographical critique.

The second claim is that the literary history of this category from the nineteenth to the twentieth century should be understood in terms of discontinuity rather than filial descent. To be clear, it is H. G. Wells’s novella The Time Machine (1895) that marks the date when, among the texts I have considered, time is first thought of as a linear continuum along which the traveller can voyage, as if by the turn of a dial; it is also the point when alternate history breaks away from the pre-positivist historiographical contexts in which its texts were enmeshed, and upon which its format provided a particular means of reflection. To formulate time as linear is also the condition for counterfactual history—it allows the writer to assume or invent the
ability to rewind time’s narrative and introduce a point of divergence, whose consequences can then be described. This is the manoeuvre that Edmund Lawrence performs in It May Happen Yet (1899), and his conclusions need to be understood as positivist, even if presented in the hypothetical realm of alternate history: certain military weaknesses would be exploited in the case of an invasion from the east-anglian coast. Alternate history rapidly becomes a form that emphasises consequences and assumes a linear-chronological model of history as governed by cause and effect. G. M. Trevelyan’s essay “If Napoleon Had Won the Battle of Waterloo” (1907) becomes the standard format for re-imagining the past, with J. C. Squire’s collection of counterfactual essays, If It Had Happened Otherwise, confirming the template. The format, seen in a body of film, TV programmes and literature that exploits the idea of history as a navigable chronology of forking paths has now become commonplace.¹

Alternate history prior to The Time Machine did not understand history in this way. Israel Zangwill’s review, already quoted, alerts us to the novelty of Wells’s conceit by refusing to accept the description of time as a fourth dimension and navigable continuum. In the earlier alternate histories, we can recognise two other historiographical models: a romantic-utopian notion that the past can be recovered, and a critical-reflexive manner of scrutinising romantic and providentialist receptions of history. In both, the present is interfused with the past, either as historical potentialities which remain accessible now, or by understanding the past as the material from which desires or affirmations are formulated in the present, according to ideological orientation. If history exists in a proximate relation to the present, “consequence” does not refer simply to the effects of antecedent causes. Alroy (1833) implants a political legacy to be recovered in present political and cultural life by inventing a passage of middle-eastern history, and Napoléon et la conquête du monde (1836) is an exposition of the consequences of wishing the past to be different—utopian historical desires degrade into dystopian absurdity.

One might object that Geoffroy-Château’s novel performs a similar alteration to history to the counterfactual Napoleonic scenarios of Lawrence and others at the end of the century (from which I wish to distinguish it). My reading of Napoléon apocryphe has been otherwise; the increasingly unreal society, following the author’s imaginary correction of Napoleon’s military mistake, forces us back into reflection upon the present. It not only reminds us of the mythological hero’s fallibility, but brings to light the ideological legacy that remained after the defeat of the emperor: utopian desires were invested in an authoritarian leader, now dead, whose ambitions were totalitarian.

¹ Poul Anderson’s Time Patrol novels, the BBC series Doctor Who, Peter Howitt’s 1998 film Sliding Doors (a remake of Krzysztof Kieślowski’s 1981 film Blind Chance), the Back to the Future film series, and Shrek Forever After (2010) are the examples that come immediately to mind.
The reflections upon history as light transmissions visible to other inhabitants of the universe should also be distinguished from the linear-chronological model of history, and from the literary genre of science fiction. It is true that the imaginary Beings capable of moving faster than light could fast-forward or rewind historical time by changing their location in space, but in the chapter on astronomical alternate history I showed that this conjecture did not lead to suggestions of time travel across, nor intervention in, human history. Rather, its connection with alternate history was through the conception of an inter-planetary subjectivity distributed between Beings upon different planets, examining each other through optical instruments and having variant forms of each other’s histories. There was also a tendency to imagine other histories in the universe in terms of repetition, whether as reincarnations of the same Beings on different planets (Flammarion), as the absence of fate in a universe which accommodates every permutation of human history in infinite time and space (Blanqui), or as one master-copy and its duplicates (Hale). Similarly, by aligning Morris’s dream novels with a tradition of reflexive historiography that operates in alternate history, we can introduce a distance between them and their immediate historical context of Socialist-League politics and polemic. This is not to make the claim that *News from Nowhere* is an un-or antipolitical work, but my reading has emphasised its reflection upon the investment of history with desires, both political and aesthetic, in a similar manner to *Napoléon et la Conquête du Monde*.

“Contingent” is a word that has been used throughout this thesis to describe the undetermined, aleatory nature of events; or at at the very least which are not predictable with certainty, even though such uncertain eventualities might be anticipated as outcomes requiring a contingency plan. It is therefore surprising that the term has been used (and has felt so necessary) to refer to the past historical possibilities of alternate history. Because contingency seems to orient us toward an uncertain future (to be feared, anticipated, or insured against), its usefulness in reconsidering the past is puzzling. Furthermore, if contingency “is that which thinking can grasp only as event,” how appropriate is its application to unrealised outcomes—non-events—from the past? I will use the term to review the claims of this thesis and focus my position on the emergence of alternate history and on how the examination of this eccentric and dispersed category can illuminate processes of literary history.

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2 The novel’s opening frame, of returning home after a meeting of the Socialist League had broken up into factional disputes, suggests that this reading is not a contrarian one.

I have said that the association of alternate history with military events lies in the way that ‘what-if’ imaginaries, attached to battles or incidents in military conflict, only became a commonplace form of counterfactual history late in the nineteenth century. Edmund Lawrence played out the events that might have followed a Napoleonic invasion over 90 years earlier, and did so in order to make military-strategic observations about the defence of England. This use of an imaginary past brings his novel *It May Happen Yet* into a close relationship with George T. Chesney’s undated invasion narrative, “The Battle of Dorking” (1871); in both cases, the imaginary scenarios are presented as the undesirable consequence of economic or military failures: for Chesney the mistake is the military “retrenchment” of liberal-progressive governments, and for Lawrence it is the lack of fortifications in East Anglia. These instances of cultural and military decline recall the idea, in Cromie, Wells and Forster, of an effete future humanity. In Chesney’s and Lawrence’s narratives, the alternate-historical format serves as an object-lesson, and the latter’s text gives us an emphatic contingency plan: “Therefore London should be placed in a state of defence now, in this year 1899, while we still have peace.”

Two opposed meanings of “contingency” apply here: its reference to “a thing that may or may not happen, a possibility of the future” (both writers invoke the anxiety of potential invasions to which Britain is vulnerable), and the historiographical sense of an event being “dependent for its occurrence or character on or upon some prior occurrence or condition” (the nation’s vulnerability is the consequence of cultural and policy errors). The meanings of contingency therefore contain a paradox, for one invokes historical determinism, with each event understood as the consequence of its precursors, while another describes the freedom of future events from necessity and fate. We might suppose that these two meanings are simply demarcated according to whether they have happened yet: retrospection leads to an interpretation of the past as necessary, while future contingency refers to our inability to predict future outcomes until the requisite hindsight makes a causal explanation possible.

Thomas Reid made an observation in 1788 that extends contingency as uncertainty to both future and past: “There seems to be a great analogy between the prescience of future contingents and the memory of past contingents.” We relinquish the consequences of the former, Reid tells us, to God, but of contingency in the past, “we [...] are apt to think it impossible.” Reid is reporting (in the late-eighteenth century) a deterministic belief in the necessity of the past that is grounded in theology; at the other end of the nineteenth century

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5 Lawrence, *It May Happen Yet*, 153.
we encounter positivist assertions of the concreteness of the historical past—as that which the forensic scientist can excavate and decipher on its own terms. In both cases a view of the past as immutable is invoked, a view that is only reinforced by the necessity of inventing a machine that can return to it and divert its trajectory. The time between these theological and secular beliefs in the immutability of the past is the time of alternate history in the nineteenth century. It is also the period in which its romantic-utopian and critical-reflexive modes were intelligible, during a period of historiographical uncertainty (or contingency), when a recuperative model for understanding the past persisted, and with it a reflexive awareness of how we project our own transforming desires into the fabric of history.

In these patterns, in which the past stands in a relation to the present that I have described as spatial, contingency refers to the indeterminacy of the present. It contains apertures of potentiality, into which historical values may flow if directed by the right historical sensibility—one which is transcendental in the case of Richard Jefferies, and messianic in the case of Benjamin Disraeli. Or, in a critical-reflexive frame, it may be possible to imagine a better society, as Renouvier encourages us to do, by unthinking determinism through reflection upon historical contingency—that is to say the non-essential character of historical development, both in the past and in the present. In William Morris’s dream novels, we are able to clarify the objects of our aspirations by recognising that our apprehension of history is both a course of study and a situated dream, coloured by our “zeal” for the past that divides us against ourselves. It creates its own contingent alignments with the past and also a sense of fellowship that rescues the past and present from its political disappointments: “he who doeth well in fellowship, and because of fellowship, shall not fail though he seem to fail to-day, but in days hereafter shall he and his work yet be alive, and men be holpen by them to strive again and yet again.”

Just as self-conscious and strategic political alignments are formed with the past, disavowals of genealogical affiliation may be made in literary history. The earliest usage of “contingent” in English is in Geometry, to describe the relation of shapes that are in contact, but which only tangentially connect. This research project was initiated retrospectively, as a search for the origins of a category that achieved visibility in the twentieth century. The pursuit of precursors, of first iterations, led to two discoveries. The first is that mythical first causes elude literary history, and that energies may be more productively applied to the examination of patterns of emergence, themselves contingent upon the orientation and situation of the critic. Finally, we may discover that our assumptions of filial descent may be erroneous and

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9 Morris, A Dream of John Ball, XVI:233.
that periods of literature can be extracted from the constraints of genealogy—to understand them better and to disrupt notions of smooth historical descent.
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