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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