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Winthrop-Young, Geoffrey

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Fallacies and Thresholds: Notes on the Early Evolution of Alternate History

*Geoffrey Winthrop-Young**

Abstract: »Schwellen und Trugschlüsse: Anmerkungen zur frühen Evolution der Alternate History«. The paper attempts to reconstruct the founding decade of the Science Fiction subgenre Alternate History. The basic premise is that Alternate History is a highly improbable genre whose success relied on the negotiation of new thresholds of acceptability and credibility. Adopting an evolutionary approach, the goal is to show how – after a series of unsuccessful earlier attempts – Alternate History emerged from the refunctionalization of literary plots and devices (especially, the time-travel and the multiple-worlds scenarios). One notable consequence of this evolution was the renewed exchange historiography and allohistorical fiction.

Keywords: Alternate History, Science Fiction, genre fiction, time travel, multiple worlds.

I. Introduction: History's High-Class Hookers

What is Science Fiction? Augustine had the right answer: *Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio*. Defining SF has become a Verdun of theory: definitions are no longer advanced to occupy new territory or regain lost grounds but mainly serve to exhaust the participants. Increasingly, critics are caught between complex proposals (common in the 1970s and then again from the late 1990s on) and the capitulation to market forces (SF is simply all that is sold as SF), between the escape into subjective whim (SF is what I or you happen to label SF) and attempts to defy generic categorization altogether (since SF is fundamentally about transgression it has to transgress its own genre boundaries). To be sure, with the exception of the latter point the same can be said of many genres that over the course of the last century expanded in imperial fashion, but what makes attempts to define SF especially difficult is the particularly conspicuous divide between prescriptive and descriptive definitions. “All definitions of sf have a component of prescription (what sf writers *ought* to do, and what their motives, purposes and philosophies *ought* to be) as well as description (what they habitually *do* do, and what kinds of things tend to accumulate under the label)” (Stableford, Clute and Nicholls

* Address all communications to: Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, Central, Eastern and Northern European Studies, 1873 East Mall, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., V6T 1Z1, Canada; e-mail: winthrop@interchange.ubc.ca.

313; emphasis in the original). An interesting self-reflexive moment: a genre that fundamentally depends on the divide between what is and what could (or should) be is caught between definitions what it is and what it could (or should) be.

But as difficult as it may be to define Science Fiction as a genre, it is easy to depict its history using the props and tropes of genre fiction. Scholarship is replete with attempts to fashion the history of SF into a chronicle, an epic, a tragedy, an Edisonade, or an open-ended postmodern novel. Perhaps the most memorable example is Stanisław Lem's portrayal of the (d)evolution of SF as a tawdry melodrama, a story of seduction and debasement straight from the pen of a 19th-century French novelist. A "creature of noble birth, the scion of learned and imaginative parents" SF was, alas, "afflicted with a dubious entertainment value" that precipitated its downfall. It could not abstain from "sleeping around with the detective novel," ultimately ending up in the "suspect repository" of "pulp magazines." But since SF possessed "beauty as well with piercing intelligence" it does not resemble an "ordinary streetwalker" as much as a "first class call-girl" who shows up in designer clothes and is able to discuss philosophy. "It is obvious, however, that talking about philosophy is beside the point: none of her customers would seriously have a *tête-à-tête* with her on the crucial problems concerning the existence of humankind since she was not summoned for that purpose in the first place" (Lem 239). SF, in other words, is the literary equivalent of a high-class hooker; and the main culprit of this sad tale – the johns and pimps responsible for the downfall of the promising young beauty – is the American mass market. Without its nefarious influence things would have turned out differently:

SF could have shot up like a signal rocket towards the apical position of initiating readers into the great secrets of science and human philosophy and into the moral problematics of technology that are nowadays so pressing. It could have provided a forum for passionate discussions about the ultimate truths concerning the human species; it could have created complete systems of metaphysics, directed into the future by taking the past into consideration. All this could have happened. But it has not happened. (Lem 235).

Lem's remarks were occasioned by the reprint of Antoni Słonimski's 1924 novel *Torpeda czasu* ("The Time Torpedo"), the rollicking tale of the relentlessly idealistic inventor Professor Pankton who travels back in time from the year 2123 to the French Revolution in order to change history for the better. Aiming for the post-Thermidorian lull of 1795 he plans to abort the career of Napoleon, whose martial reign Pankton considers the fountainhead of all modern wars. But due to a calculation error his team arrives in 1796; Napoleon is already underway in Italy and Pankton is forced to stage a large-scale intervention at the Battle of Lodi. Unable to complete the battle that kick-started his rise to power, Napoleon disappears from history, but the war between France and the Coalition continues. While the English capture one of the professors'

associates and thus secure their share of the weapons imported from the future, the committed pacifist Pankton becomes dictator of a besieged French Republic. Events briefly shift to Northern Egypt, there are battles at the Marne and at Compiègne, and a commune-type Paris is surrounded by invading forces. Thrown off track, an accelerated history reels and lurches, wildly groping for places and events it normally would have passed through much later. Pankton's history improvement project is a miserable failure. Even worse, since his own grandparents met at an exhibition of Napoleon memorabilia he effectively preempted his own existence. Traveling back to the future, he vanishes into nothingness.

Słonimski's novel posits that the French Revolution did not live up to its potential, that its promises of universal brotherhood and equality were guillotined at birth, raped and dragged across the continent by Napoleon, and subsequently forced into ideological prostitution. Pankton, then, views modern history in much the same way as Lem views the history of SF: both descended from promising origins into in the red-light districts of belligerent empire-building and consumer capitalism. Things could have turned out better, both SF and history had the potential to progress more in line with their original potential, resulting in a future far superior to our present, but – regretfully – it did not happen. The tragedy of SF, in other words, is encapsulated and represented by an *alternate history* that expresses a profound regret over the tragedy of modern history. A fitting choice on Lem's part, for according to Elisabeth Wesseling this sense of regret is at the core of Alternate History¹:

Alternate histories are inspired by the notion that any given historical situation implies a plethora of divergent possibilities that far exceed the possibilities which happened to have been realized. From this point of view, the progress of history appears as a tragic waste, not merely of human lives, but of options and opportunities in general, as a single possibility is often realized by the forceful suppression of alternatives. Alternate histories can be regarded as attempted to recuperate some of these losses (Wesseling 100).

A noble sentiment, no doubt, but one that raises more questions than it answers.

Is Alternate History always linked to a sense of regret? Aren't many early alternate histories expressions of a whiggish or chrono-chauvinist sense of pride and relief that we are living in the best of all possible histories? Second, the characterization presupposes notions of historical plenitude, contingency and mutability, all of which are part and parcel of our postmodern sensibility. But that history produces far more than it ultimately consumes, that the past did not necessarily entail our present, that it easily could have lead to a present very different from than the one that happened to come about, that history can

¹ Throughout this essay Alternate History will be capitalized when referring to the genre. Alternate History and uchronia will be used synonymously.

be changed, more importantly: that it is so sensitive that it can be changed at any point – these assumptions may characterize current alternate histories, yet how prevalent were they when Alternate History first emerged? It was a long trek from there to here, an uphill struggle made all the more difficult by one of the genre’s fundamental features. Alternate History is, after all, a highly improbable genre. If you look at the literary history of the suspension of disbelief (in other words, the history of fiction), you will notice that utopian and fantastic narratives preceded uchronian narratives. Indeed, the former were a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of the latter. Only after readers and writers developed the skills necessary to explore that which is not but could be were they able to slowly explore that which could have been but never was. We are dealing with the most fictional of fiction, thus many of the negotiations, differentiations, literary adaptations and refunctionalizations that facilitated the rise of modern fiction returned with a vengeance when the readers, writers and editors of the Golden Age of SF collaborated in establishing Alternate History. This difficult evolutionary process is the topic of this paper: Taking note of certain characteristic fallacies that accompany conventional accounts of the history of Alternate History, I will concentrate on the genre’s first, formative period, roughly, from the early 1930s to the early 1940s. The implications, however, extend far beyond.

II. Anticipatory Fallacy

Who wrote the first alternate history? Critics do not agree with each other; sometimes they do not even agree with themselves. Karen Hellekson, author of the first full-length study of the genre to appear in English, claims that Alternate History “did not exist in Western literature until 1836,” which marked the publication of Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Chateau’s *Napoléon et la Conquête du Monde*. One page later, however, readers are informed that the first known alternate history in English is “Of a History of Events which Have Not Happened,” a chapter in Isaac D’Israeli’s *Curiosities of Literature* from 1824 (Hellekson 14). Well, which one? Or is English literature not part of Western literature (which would indeed be an alternate history worth pursuing)? To be sure, both candidates predate other alleged firsts such as Edmund Lawrence’s *It May Happen Yet: A Tale of Bonaparte’s Invasion of England* (1899), Edward Everett Hale’s “Hands Off” (1881), or Nathanael Hawthorne’s “P.’s Correspondence” (1845). But then again, already in the 1970s Pierre Versins had pinpointed as “la première uchronie” a chapter entitled “D’une nouvelle Séance Royale” in Delisle de Sales’ 12-volume utopia *Ma République* (1791), which offers “en une vingtaine de pages un tableau de la Révolution telle qu’elle aurait pu être si l’attitude de Louis XVI envers ses nobles avait été assez ferme pour que le Serment du Jeu de Paume en devienne inutile” (Versins 232). And it doesn’t even stop here, for 1845, 1824 or 1791 are all temporal peanuts, as it

were, in comparison to the reign of Augustus when Livy penned the 142 books comprising *Ab Urbe Condita*, the ninth of which contains a counterfactual digression on how soundly Alexander the Great would have been defeated had he opted to attack Rome instead of Persia. Others go even further back and point to conjectural passages in the *Histories* of Herodotus, which would imply that the father of historiography also sired counterfactual history.²

As in Lem's melodrama, *Alternate History* contains in rarefied essence the basic features of SF, though in this particular case it is less a matter of the subgenre reproducing the traits of the master genre than of *Alternate History* scholarship encapsulating SF criticism. The attempt to progressively push back the beginnings of *Alternate History* is reminiscent of the many attempts to ennoble SF by rooting it in early modern utopias, medieval travel literature or the epics of antiquity, up to and including the exploits of Ulysses and Gilgamesh. (And not without reason: Doesn't the ending of the *Gilgamesh* epic, its roaring description of the skyscrapers of Ur, fade straight into the opening of *Metropolis* with its modern ziggurats?). Ultimately, however, we are dealing with an anticipatory fallacy that presents evidence of a tradition which in fact did not exist. Literary relic hunters intimate connections where there were only isolated incidents. Marc Angenot emphasized this point in an interesting study of French 19th-century SF in the days before Jules Verne, in which he lumped together the *uchronias* by Geoffroy and Charles Renouvier (to whom we owe the term *uchronie*) with an extensive assortment of highly varied futurist texts that despite the success and undeniable quality of some of them never produced any offspring:

[T]here existed in France before Verne a heterogeneous but rather extensive production of what has to be called science fiction. Before Verne, however, SF never established a *tradition*, either as an industrial sub-literature or as an avant-garde aware of its aesthetic innovations. On the contrary, this production without cultural continuity remained deprived of any critical feedback – remained repressed and *unnamable*. It seems that each writer felt that he was starting from zero, for he scarcely knew his predecessors, or rather did not recognize them. He did not see the link between them and himself. (Angenot 59; emphasis in the original).

Before Verne there was no futurist tradition but rather a wide range of literary experimentation including early, non-consequential forays into *uchronian*

² Ultimately Versins outdoes the competition by traveling back to the camp fires of the Stone Age, thus moving alternate history from the literary and historiographical to the anthropological domain: "Il est même probable qu'une enquête approfondie dans les productions de tous le temps montrerait, au moins à l'état de traces, cette façon d'envisager l'Histoire, au moins depuis le commencement d'icelle. Il est si tentant de la refaire... et nous pouvons être sûrs de ce qu'à l'aube de l'humanité des hommes ont, déjà, autour du feu, transformé une partie de chasse désastreuse en triomphe. Mais une telle recherche serait oeuvre d'anthropologue." (Versins 904).

writing by Geoffroy and Renouvier, after Verne there was a tradition, but it was narrower, more conformist and manageable than what had come before. The uchronias fell by the wayside.

Without any recourse to biological theories of evolution, Angenot applied to the history of literature what Franco Moretti, indebted to Charles Darwin by way of Stephen Jay Gould, called (with Hegelian inflection) the “slaughterhouse of literature” (Moretti 2000). Far more texts and genres perish than survive, and it is especially in the incipient stage of a new development, when writers are casting about to find new forms and techniques, that the extinction-survival ratio is particularly lop-sided. It is misleading to attribute to this “unnamable” early stage – which can extend over a long period of time – notions of tradition and continuity, for that would imply a shared sense of writing (and reading) within and against a set of literary protocols that are the basis for the establishment of a genre. If genre labels are to be applied at all, they serve to show how disparate the texts were. As Angenot pointed out, Renouvier’s *Uchronie* was never conceived as a (para)literary text but as an attempt “de donner à l’historiographie fictionnelle le statut d’une méditation philosophique,” while Geoffroy’s satirical *Napoléon apocryphe* belongs to the tradition of anti-Napoleonic pamphlets (Angenot, Suvin and Gouvanic 28-30). Much the same can be said about Livy, Delisle de Sale, Edward Everett Hale and the other usual anticipatory suspects. To insinuate that they are part and parcel of a perceived genealogy elides the fact that these texts were not picked up by 20th century writers of alternate histories and (with the exception of Livy) almost completely forgotten in their own genre domains. More importantly, this alleged genealogy runs roughshod over questions of genre. It is one thing for histories of modern aviation to celebrate hot-air balloons as early precursors; it is something very different to grant the same status to Ali Baba’s flying carpet.

III. Taxonomic Fallacy

But all this talk about genre raises the question: What is alternate history? Not long ago I entered a university bookstore and came across five novels depicting alternate timelines in which Nazi Germany turned out to be more successful than in our own. The texts were located in different sections, for which an enthusiastic sales rep provided the following explanation: Len Deighton’s *SS-GB* had been relegated to the Mystery; Deighton, after all, writes detective novels. Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* was shelved in the refined Literature section (between Rilke and Rumi) in appreciation of the fact that Roth has risen above mere “fiction,” while Robert Harris’s *Fatherland* was in the Fiction section since his bestsellers have yet to attain the status of “literature.” The Science Fiction section contained a copy of Harry Turtledove’s *In the Balance*, the first volume of his *Worldwar* series, which, the salesman assured me, was highly appropriate because it features aliens and space flight.

Philip Dick's *Man in the High Castle* achieved the rare feat of being located both in Literature and in Science Fiction sections in recognition of the fact that Dick is both a classic and a SF writer. And finally there was a bargain bin sporting an old copy of Newt Gingrich's *1945*, which was there because nobody was interested. Let's face it: Bookstores are the real nemesis of literary scholarship. An unbridgeable abyss separates their mysterious display practices from the equally esoteric academic attempts to impose order on the messy universe of writing.

So what is alternate history? Let us briefly look at two high-profile attempts to nail things down. Writing for the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, arguably one of the most important resources for students of SF, Brian Stableford succinctly defined "Alternate Worlds" as "an account of Earth as it might have become in consequence of some hypothetical alteration in history" (Stableford 23). In a frequently quoted passage, Darko Suvin, at one point arguably one of the most important scholars working in the field of SF, had a bit more to say:

Alternative History can be identified as that form of SF in which an alternative locus (in time, space, etc.) that shares the material and causal verisimilitude of the writer's world is used to articulate different possible solutions of societal problems, those problems being of sufficient importance to require an alteration in the overall history of the narrated world. (Suvin 149).

More separates these definitions than mere quantity of words. Stableford's is open and non-discriminatory; neither does it care what kind of plausible, improbable or downright fantastic event altered history, nor does it beef up the relevance of allohistorical alteration by tying it to social problem-solving. By contrast, Suvin's definition insists on a plausible proximity between our empirical world and its altered counterpart, and it links the act of alteration to a critical awareness of social problems, thus ruling out alteration for the sake of – escapist – alteration. Stableford's ecumenical definition corresponds to the very flexible selection criteria used by the compilers of the large print- and web-based bibliographies of Alternate History, Suvin's is closer to Lem's disdain for pimped-out SF literature. In short, Stableford's definition is descriptive, Suvin's is prescriptive. Once again, Alternate History scholarship recapitulates a salient feature of SF criticism.

These disjunctive genre definitions are further muddled by a plethora of – sometimes interchangeable, sometimes incompatible – genre names: 'uchronia', 'allohistory', 'parahistory', 'paratopia', 'allotopia', 'alternate history', the semantically more correct 'alternative history' (on this point see Shippey 15), 'counterfeit world', 'counterfactual romance', 'what-if story', and so on. Sometimes terminological differentiation is employed to enforce normative evaluation. Christoph Rodiek, for instance, distinguishes between uchronias and alternate histories based on how carefully authors depict historical divergence. The former exhibit maximum plausibility in the course of which "der hypothetische Geschichtsverlauf wie eine Kontrafaktur Zug um

Zug auf das historische Original zurückbezogen wird,” while the latter are merely escapist yarns heading for “das total Andere als Evasionsraum” (Rodiek 41). The verdict is clear: “Nicht um sorgfältig recherchierte Abzweigungen vom Strom des historisch Vertrauten geht es, sondern um das Prinzip des radikalen Verblüffens (vgl. Gernsbacks Ausdruck ‚amazing stories‘)” (Rodiek 42). The descriptive binary plausibility vs. non-plausibility collapses into the normative binary conscientious vs. escapist, and without further explanation the latter is referred to Hugo Gernsback (who incidentally had a very different understanding of ‘amazing’).

More importantly, there are numerous attempts to classify texts according to the way in which history is altered. Hellekson proposes an interesting tripartite distinction:

My own divisions, which point to the moment of the break rather than the subject’s position, are as follows: (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; and (3) the parallel worlds story. Nexus stories occur at the moment of the break. The true alternate history occurs after the break, sometimes a long time after. And the parallel worlds story implies that there was no break – that all events that could have occurred did occur. (Hellekson 5).

This is both useful and revealing – useful because it allows us categorize the broad spectrum of alternate histories without normative exclusions, and revealing because the proposal is, as we shall see, itself a result of the history of Alternate History, a deposit, as it were, of certain crucial steps that facilitated the evolution of the genre.

IV. Necessary Interim: Splendid Isolation

But before we get started on the evolutionary mechanisms of Alternate History, why all this taxonomic activity? Historically speaking, taxonomies appear as a compromise designed to negotiate the barrier between the critical norm and the comprehensive survey. Taxonomies straddle the boundary that separates the normative and the descriptive: They pay homage to the empirical spirit of the latter by taking note of what has in fact occurred, yet they retain the normative impetus of the former by imposing an order that will facilitate analysis and evaluation. Literary taxonomies mark both an acceptance of as well a resistance to an unruly excess of texts; they are an extendable grid, a flexible filtering mechanism employed to counteract literary entropy, when vertical barriers between genres and horizontal barriers between high and low are in danger of being wiped out by an avalanche of writing.

Conventional taxonomies, then, do take into account historical processes, but rarely do see themselves as historical by-products. This, however, is precisely the way in which Alternate History needs to be tackled; it requires that

we replace ‘timeless’ taxonomies and genre definitions with more historically informed accounts. Wesseling describes genres as social institutions that

(...) suggest specific solutions to the esthetic problem of matching form and content, and can therefore guide the act of literary composition. For the reader, genres constitute sets of expectations which steer the reading process. Generic repositories may be regarded as bodies of shared knowledge which have been inferred from perceived regularities in individual literary texts. As sets of norms of which both reader and writer are aware, genres fulfill an important role in the process of literary communication. (Wesseling 18).

In other words, if genres are social institutions that enable as well as rely on acts of literary communication, it makes little sense to speak of a genre when there is no genre consciousness (*Gattungsbewußtsein*). Here, Wesseling is saying much the same as Angenot: No longer an unnamable mosaic of isolated literary events (as French SF was prior to Verne), a genre presupposes a common awareness of boundaries, regularities and influences that subsequently give rise to a tradition. “Collectively sf writers build shared meta-texts in which ideas and techniques become common property and are readily adapted by other writers.” (Bilson 51)

Lester del Rey once called Hugo Gernsback’s decision to print the addresses of the correspondents whose letters appeared in *Amazing Stories* “one of the most important events in the history of science fiction” (del Rey 45). No doubt about it: Facilitating the exchange between SF readers (many of whom were, or soon turned into, writers) was crucially important for the creation of a genre-defining “meta-text” in the so-called Golden Age of SF, when an ongoing close interaction involving writers, readers and a group of highly committed hands-on editors and publishers elaborated a set of protocols governing the production and reception of SF texts. This evolutionary process underlying the institutionalized emergence of genre-specific rules is by no means unique to SF, but what makes SF so remarkable is the speed and the laboratory-like clarity with which the splendid isolation of the ‘Golden Age’ managed to bring about genre solidification. As del Rey notes, the most important aspect of this, the formative period of SF, was the degree to which the rapidity of its evolution was linked to specialized magazines. “To those who bewail the past ‘ghettoization’ of science fiction, I suggest that the present general acceptance of the literature has been impossible without such a past” (del Rey 80).³ The wailing, while considerably diminished, can still be heard. Indeed, maybe the disdain with which some academic critics still treat SF is not only linked to its alleged intellectual poverty or technofetishist conservatism, or to the assumed adolescent mindset

³ This ghettoization of Alternate History may also serve to ward off ‘mainstream’ uchronias. Tom Shippey made this point with reference to Kingsley Amis’s *The Alteration*: “[It] has never been much regarded within the field, and has been left imprisoned in the ghetto of the mainstream” (Shippey 16).

of its fans and practitioners, but to the fact that the rise of SF reveals in such lucidity the very mundane processes that govern the mundane mysteries of literary evolution. To study the evolution of SF is to discard many cherished tools developed for the study of literary history.

V. Contextual Fallacies

John J. Pierce has singled out Nat Schachner's "Ancestral Voices" (1933) and Murray Leinster's "Sidewise in Time" (1934) as the two stories "that did the most to revolutionize the treatment of time travel and parallel worlds in science fiction" (Pierce 176). "Ancestral Voices" tells the story of a man who travels back in time to the Hunnish invasion of Rome and kills one of Attila's warriors. Since his victim happened to be his own ancestor, the traveler suffers the same fate as Slonimiski's Professor Pankton: he vanishes, as do the 50,000 other globally distributed descendants of the unfortunate Hun, including a rabid Central European dictator who keeps mouthing off about racial purity. F. Orlin Tremaine, the editor of *Astounding*, had high hopes that Schachner's story would spark a debate about the logical and conceptual implications of time travel, but no such discussion emerged. In retrospect, the real import of Schachner's story is not its early treatment of the time-travel paradox but the fact that it is the first within the North American SF circuit that linked time-travel to the retroactive alteration of history. Today the link is a cultural cliché, as evidenced by Doc Emmett Brown's constant reminder to Marty McFly in *Back to the Future* that "anything you do could have serious repercussions on future events." However, learned digressions about the historical impact of Cleopatra's nose and missing horseshoe nails notwithstanding, this increased sensitivity to the mutability of history hardly existed in literature prior to the 1930s. On the contrary, the literary discovery of time travel, from Louis-Sébastien Mercier to H.G. Wells, comes with the understanding, indeed the constraint that history, while now open to inspection and experience, cannot be changed. Consider the closing paragraph of Wells's "Time Machine." The traveler has disappeared for good and the narrator is left to wonder whether he has fallen prey to the "hairy savages of the Age of Unpolished Stone" or "the huge reptilian brutes of the Jurassic times" (Wells 91). At no point does the narrator consider the possibility that the traveler may kill a Neanderthal or a T-rex and thus alter the course of history. Fifty years later, in Ray Bradbury's famous short story "A Sound of Thunder," a man travels back in time on a Jurassic Safari expedition and accidentally squashes a butterfly. Returning to the present he discovers that the outcome of a presidential election has been changed. When he set out, the good liberal had just been voted into office, after his return it is the fascist candidate called – what else? – "Deutscher." Even worse, people have started spelling English words in a German way. The free world is coming to a Teutonic end – all because of a squashed Mesozoic lepidopteran.

At this point literary histories tend to indulge in expansive context invocations. For example, readers are invited to view the rise of Alternate History in the 1930s against the background of the rise of communism and fascism. The emergence of concrete alternatives to liberal democracy, so the argument goes, lead to a greater willingness to indulge in allohistorical scenarios. On an even grander scale, Alternate History is linked to the growing awareness of human agency. It is no coincidence that early writers like Delisle de Sale, Geoffroy or Słonimski presented the French Revolution as the supreme bifurcation point, for no other event signaled to the same extent that humans make history, and they can either perform this successfully or botch the job. Alternate History presupposes the internalization of human agency and fallibility in history; and whether writers express regret over what could have been or relief that things didn't turn out worse, the genre is written in the shadow of Bastille. More importantly for more recent alternate histories from "A Sound of Thunder" to *The Difference Engine* and beyond, the mutability of history acquires extreme sensitivity. Fuelled by the cross-cultural dissemination of esoteric scientific paradigms from quantum physics to chaos theory, any point in history, not just privileged nodes like the French Revolution, the Spanish Armada or the Battle of Gettysburg, can emerge as bifurcation points. In short, Alternate History mirrors the overall growing acceptance of historical contingency by proceeding from *kairos* to chaos.

Such invocations of context present the most widespread and incurable fallacy of literary scholarship. To be clear about this, the fallacy does not reside in the reference as such. Only a fool or a particularly headstrong proponent of *l'art-pour-l'art* aestheticism would deny the ties that bind literary production to other social domains. Rather, the fallacy consists in the assumption that the reference amounts to a fully satisfactory explanation which obviates further attempts to explain how exactly literature processes contextual change. For those interested in literary evolution (as opposed to conventional literary history), contextual invocations, while certainly not incorrect, remain useless unless or until it can be shown how outside developments are processed by genre literature. The bottom line is that writers do not invent new stories or genres from scratch; there is no immaculate narrative conception. Rather, in a process of trial-and-error extant genre-specific devices are refunctionalized and recombined in order to arrive at new narrative scenarios and genres that correspond to the changing cultural environment in such a way that they appear to be their literary effects. Time travel is a revealing example. The very first time-travel stories – e.g., Merciers *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s'il en fut jamais* (1771) – use involuntary movement through time in order to better present and experience past and future; it is a matter of "observing or

experiencing without change” (Chamberlain 285).⁴ Here, the device is still at the service of the already established historical or utopian narrative. Early time travel is, essentially, reoriented space travel; and this reference to more familiar narrative devices serves to make it more acceptable to early readers. In the second step initiated by Schachner and others, the implications of the travel itself are tentatively thematized which in turn opens up two possible third steps: (i) narrative scenarios that focus primarily on the intricacies of time-travel (the best-known examples are films: *Back to the Future*, *Terminator I-III*, *Twelve Monkeys*), and (ii) scenarios in which time travel is once again subordinated to that which it enables, but this time it is the alteration rather than the observation of history.

Something similar applies to Leinster’s “Sidewise in Time.” A cosmic calamity leads to a jumble of time-lines in the course of which sections of North America trade places with their counterparts from alternate timelines. The annual “Sidewise Awards for Alternate History” are named after Leinster’s story, and with good reason. Not only does the text feature numerous cameo performances by subsequently highly popular uchronian scenarios (the victorious Confederacy, *Roma Eterna*, a world where dinosaurs still roam, etc.), it performs two vital switches for the establishment of Alternate History. First, it recycles the props and stereotypes of the classic cross-over adventure story, but it replaces the fairy realms, secret kingdoms and supernatural domains with (pseudo)-plausible alternate timelines. Essential ingredients of the fantastic cross-over story, still very popular in the 1920s, are refunctionalized by way of infusing them with a modicum of historical concreteness. The second point arises directly from the first, for by historicizing alternate timelines the story implies that at one point in time these timelines were not yet divided. “Sidewise,” then, introduces the crucial idea of historical bifurcation (which was fully explored only a few years later in Jack Williamson’s 1938 time romp “Legions of Time”). It is “the first story in the magazines to suggest the idea that the past must have branched into multiple, parallel presents as a result of decisions which could go either way” (del Rey 67).

Furthermore, in the punctuated evolution of literary genres a juncture text like “Sidewise” not only heralds a new type of narrative but also acts as a refuge for one that is on the decline. At one point in Leinster’s story, the inhabitants of North Centerville, Massachusetts, are attacked by Vikings who speak “old-fashioned Skowegian” (whatever that may be) and hail from “Leifsholm.” The name is an obvious reference to Leif Eriksson, indicating that these Vikings are inhabitants of a timeline in which Old Norse settlers established a

⁴ Roland Innerhofer made a similar point in his excellent study of the beginnings of German-language SF. Time travel started out in part as the attempt to verify historical events or mythical narratives which were presented, as it were, as silent documentaries (Innerhoffer 412-16).

permanent foothold in North America (for details see Winthrop-Young 2002). In the context of literary genealogy, however, these Vikings hail from more exotic settings. They are the displaced inhabitants of the hidden or lost Viking Empires to be found in novels like William H. Wilson's *Rafnaland* (1900) or Robert Ames Bennet's *Thyra: A Romance of the Polar Pit*. Normally located in remote hyperborean regions, these pockets of Old Norse survivors are the Nordic counterpart of the many lost jungle kingdoms of Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan novels or the surviving dinosaur habitats in Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World*. We are dealing with the 'Lost Worlds, Lost Races' novels that flourished between the 1870s and the 1930s and whose immense popularity Thomas Clareson attributed to three factors:

[F]irst, the renewed vigor of the explorations which sought to map the interiors of Africa, Asia and South America, as well, of course, of both polar regions; secondly, the cumulative aspect of geological discoveries and theories which expanded the past almost immeasurably (. . .); and finally, the impact of archaeological discoveries and theories which (. . .) raised civilizations in the past more spectacular and mysterious than legendary El Dorado or the Kingdom of Prester John. (Clareson 118).

This is a fine example for the dialectics of mapping and literary imagination. On the one hand, the former gives rise to the latter: the search for, and mounting evidence of, splendid empires of the past produces texts in which these empires survive in isolated pockets – the Himalayas, the South American rain forest, the polar caps, or even inside the hollow earth. On the other hand, the more the *terrae incognitae* are mapped, the more the lost kingdoms, races or species run out of hiding places. Once the disappearance of unmarked spaces clashes with the new plausibility thresholds of emerging SF – that is, once an audience will no longer accept isolated Viking or dinosaur habitats north of Spitzbergen or south of the Amazon – , the surviving cultures lose their domains. But when space fails, time comes to the rescue: It is no coincidence that the decline of the Lost Kingdoms, Lost Races novel coincides with the rise of Alternate History. The latter offered a new home for the evicted cast of the former.⁵

⁵ Combining the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Harold Innis it would be possible to write a history of SF that focuses on these spatiotemporal crossovers. The reverse move from time into space occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s (not coincidentally at the same moment when the so-called spatial turn first reared its head in cultural theory). The most revealing anecdote can be found in a well-known interview with William Gibson describing his reaction to the movie *Blade Runner*: "About ten minutes into *Blade Runner*, I reeled out of the theater in complete despair over its visual brilliance and its similarity to the 'look' of *Neuromancer*, my [then] largely unwritten first novel. Not only had I been beaten to the semiotic punch, but this damned movie looked better than the images in my head!" (The *Blade Runner* FAQ). Gibson need not have worried. If *Blade Runner* with its already run-down future came to stand for the depletion of temporal energies, *Neuromancer* signaled

VI. De Camps' Lock-in

The incipient refunctionalization of time travel proposed by texts like “Ancestral Voices” gains momentum in one of the most successful and influential early alternate histories, L. Sprague de Camp’s *Lest Darkness Falls*. De Camp, without doubt “the most productive single originator of allohistorical themes” (Chamberlain 286), tells the story of Martin Padway, an American archeologist who while visiting the Roman pantheon is transported by a lightning bolt back in time to Early Middle Ages. Rather than resigning himself to a life in the past, Padway chooses to push the past forward into the future. By decisively meddling in Ostrogoth politics and introducing future technologies (ranging from the printing press to brandy distillation), he creates an improved Italo-Gothic kingdom whose modernity will ensure that the Dark Ages will be averted. Two standard objections have been raised against the story. First, critics scorned the facile way it handles time travel. Within the space of one short paragraph, Padway stumbles into a ditch in 1938 and climbs out in 535. Second, for all its historical research (how many readers in 1938 or 2008 are familiar with the life and politics of Thiudahad, Wittigis, Amalswentha and Belisarius?), *Lest Darkness Falls* subscribes to a naïve form of whiggish materialism. Start with a Yankee belief in the powers of communications technology embedded in a bit of democracy, spice it up with modern drinking habits, add a dash of Edward Gibbon’s anti-medievalism, and the Early Middle Ages will be changed for the better.

Again, my goal is not to refute these allegations but to show how they point to important but overlooked junctures in the evolution of Alternate History.⁶ The fact that de Camp – who in well-known stories such as “A Gun for Dinosaur” and “Aristotle and the Gun” demonstrated his ability to explore time travel in greater detail – should resort to such a cheap Rip-van-Winkle gimmick must be understood as an indication that the narrative focus of stories has shifted from the quandaries and technicalities of time travel to how, why and with what chances of success history may be changed as the result of such a chrononautical venture. In short, the evolution of the genre has reached a point where the device is superseded by the narrative it enabled. The next step –

the migration of utopian dreams hopes into the digital realm. *Cyberspace* comes to the rescue of emaciated time.

⁶ On a related point I would argue that even the indulgence for allegorical readings of alternate histories has a historical index. Obviously, Harry Turtledove’s most recent novel, *The Man with the Iron Heart* (2008), which is based on the counterfactual premise that Reinhard Heydrich was not assassinated but went on to lead a German resistance movement against the Allied occupation forces, can be read against the background of the occupation of Iraq. It must be kept in mind, however, that the flourishing of allegorical readings presupposes the establishment of the genre. Like media technologies, genres need to be internalized before they can become obedient carriers of messages; and like media they are most powerful when least noticed.

which would have been unacceptable just a decade earlier – will be to eschew time travel (and other functionally equivalent devices) altogether and present a scenario in which history changes all on its own. Step-by-step device refunctionalization ensures the acceptability of that which prior to these refunctionalizations would have been unacceptable to the majority of readers.

More importantly, quite apart from the fact that ideological objections tend to ignore de Camp's palpable irony, they also miss out on an intriguing evolutionary point. Ultimately, time travelers like Padway don't change the past, they *accelerate* it. History doesn't veer off, it is moved onto a faster track. Two possible scenarios emerge: either the supercharged past will sooner catch up with the present (in which case the alleged alteration of history acts a time-saving device⁷), or the accelerated past will race past our present and result in a future we have not yet achieved. As Paul Alkon has argued in his masterful study *The Origins of Futuristic Fiction*, the latter scenario is precisely what characterizes the texts of Delisle de Sales, Renouvier and Geoffroy. Their uchronias were "more or less explicitly intended as portraits of possible futures presented for convenience as though their distinctive features had already come into being" (Alkon 129). Replacing what was with what could have been will necessarily impact what will be. For us, the crucial point is that we are once

⁷ According to Angenot this is precisely what Renouvier's *Uchronie* achieves: If Marcus Aurelius is succeeded by Avidius Cassius rather than by the deplorable Commodus, history will gain momentum and skip the stagnant parts: "La satisfaction de Renouvier, c'était de montrer qu'on avait gagné deux siècles. Le récit se termine au 16e siècle, et c'est censément un manuscrit du 17e; l'Europe est parvenue à un niveau de développement intellectuel et technique équivalent à celui du 18e. Donc on a gagné du temps, car pour lui il n'y a qu'une histoire possible, celle qui va vers la révolution française, mais on en fait l'économie" (Angenot, Suvin und Gouvanic 34). Jacques Boireau has categorically stated that uchronias either accelerate or decelerate history: "En gros, le choix imposé aux auteurs d'uchronies est le suivant: ils peuvent accélérer ou ralentir le temps de l'Histoire" (Boireau 35). What needs to be added is that in the subsequent development of Alternate History this binary is itself subject to an interesting change. Up until the 1960s most alternate histories that portray a better world accelerate events, while those depicting an inferior alternative decelerate history. To make full use of Greek compounds, for the first three decades most *euchronias* are *tachychronias* while most *dyschronias* are *bradychronias* (further see Winthrop-Young 2006). In the 1960s there is a noticeable shift heralded by classic texts such as Keith Roberts' *Pavane* and Dick's *Man in the High Castle*. Roberts starts with the well-worn Catholic scenario (the Armada succeeds, Protestantism fails, the Catholic church reigns supreme), but the deceleration of history turns out to be a blessing in disguise as it allows society to leap-frog over the horrors of the industrial revolution straight into modernity. Dick has the victorious Nazis emerge as thanatocratic technocrats who already in the 1960s send astronauts to Mars. (Interested readers may wish to engage Roberts against the background of Carl Schmitt's theory of the *Katechon* and Dick in light of Heidegger's critique of technology.) Again, contextualists will refer this juncture to overall cultural changes primarily associated with the 1960s – the critique of unfettered progress, the awareness of ecological disaster, and so on –, but it is necessary to keep in mind that much like time travel and the multiple timelines scenarios alterations of historical rates of change are also narrative devices involved in creating and changing a genre.

again dealing with acceptability strategies. The uchronian challenge is mitigated either by assuring that the altered past will in time dovetail with our present or, more subtly, by aligning the uchronian narrative with the well-established conventions of futurist fiction.

Something equally significant occurs in de Camp's *The Wheels of If*, which expands on Leinster's "Sidewise in Time" just as *Lest Darkness Falls* had on "Ancestral Voices." The protagonist, feisty New York attorney Allister Park, is dumped by his political opponents in a quaint Celtic-Norse America. Once again, the spurious use of the enabling device (the gadget employed to literally spin Park out of this world into an alternate one resembles a roulette wheel) indicates that the multiple-timeline concept, too, has been superseded by the scenario it enables. Of greater interest to historians is the degree to which the novel is informed by historiography. While Leinster had only made a few perfunctory gestures to ensure a minimal degree of allohistoriographical pseudo-credibility, de Camp goes into detail. *The Wheels of If* is nothing less than a hilarious riff on some of the counterfactual digressions to be found in Arnold Toynbee's *Study of History*. Essentially, de Camp combines two speculations that Toynbee had treated separately: First, the text ensures the demise of the Catholic church by altering the outcomes of the Battle of Tours (Karl Martell is defeated) and the Synod of Whitby (Columba's Ionan Church wins out over its Roman rival). Second, de Camp follows Toynbee's speculations on a triumphant Scandinavian civilization (further see Winthrop-Young 2002, 197-201), though de Camp's "Bretwaldate of Vinland" is more realistic than Toynbee's Norse empire straddling the Northern hemisphere. In final analysis, de Camp's use of Toynbee is part of the early attempt to ensure greater acceptability. The work of historians becomes increasingly important for negotiating the credibility and acceptability thresholds of alternate histories in much the same way as scientific borrowings become the benchmark for the degree of (pseudo)scientific plausibility that SF texts must adhere to. In the texts of Geoffrey and Renouvier, historiographical, fictional and counterfactual discursive strategies remained uncomfortably close, thus rendering it difficult to assign a clearly defined genre status. For the emergence of Alternate History proper, however, borrowings from historiography were indispensable, but the exchange between the two was so successful precisely because of their obvious distance from each other. It is up to historians to determine to what degree the reverse process has set in, that is, to what degree Alternate History is finding its way back into historiography (for a relaxed approach see Salewski).

VII. Summary and Credits

Let me summarize the pertinent points of this analysis:

- 1) Alternate History – an unstable literary compound of entertainment and conjecture – is one of the most improbable genres. Few other types of narra-

tive demand such a suspension of disbelief; it therefore comes as no surprise that neither the genre nor the willingness to read it evolved *ex nihilo*. Maybe more than any other genre Alternate History required a synergetic trial-and-error process involving readers, writers and middlemen in order to negotiate, establish and subsequently renegotiate acceptability thresholds.

- 2) In order to study this process it is necessary to go beyond the usual contextual explanations. Analysts must resort to an approach that discards noteworthy yet ultimately irrelevant precursors and instead focus on the joint evolution of a meta-text. It must be shown how the actors operating within the developing confines of a specific genre use extant means to open up new narrative possibilities which in turn may or may not become guidelines for future production. With regard to Alternate History, the most important devices were time-travel and the multiple-timeline scenario. The refunctionalization of these devices is instrumental when it comes to explaining why Alternate History arose from SF rather than elsewhere.
- 3) As a result of this analysis, it can be shown how taxonomic proposals such as Hellekson's tripartite division into the "nexus story," the "true alternate history," and the "parallel worlds story" recapitulate some of the decisive junctures in the evolution of Alternate History. Taxonomy reveals itself as a formalized deposit of a diachronic process that tends to remove the time index. The "true" alternate history evolved decades *after* the nexus and the parallel worlds stories. First specific narrative devices had to be refunctionalized; only then did it become possible to omit the bifurcation or the assurance that the altered history is located in another timeline rather than replacing our own. The reader could now be dropped right into the middle of an altered world.

But to give final credit where credit is due: Some readers may argue that the focus on writers like Leinster and de Camp amounts to a crude, suspiciously Darwinist preference for successful mass-market products over more refined solitary texts that deserve care and resurrection. I am siding, so to speak, with Lem's pimps and johns rather than with their victims. But while I maintain that their inclusion constitutes an anticipatory fallacy, it is only fair to point out that many of these isolated precursory texts were able to develop and elaborate on their own some of the very evolutionary features and thresholds that came to characterize the early evolution of Alternate History in the American Golden Age ghetto. To return to Słonimski's *Torpeda czasu*: Look at the way it – in 1924! – uses a hackneyed cast (the multi-talented professor, his beautiful yet slightly unworldly daughter, the brash hands-on American journalist) to ease the reader into very unfamiliar territory; how time travel is used as a means for altering history; how Słonimski compensates for this uncomfortably new allo-historical narrative with a history that tries to force itself back in line (anticipating what Fritz Leiber later called the "Law of the Conservation of Reality"); how the time travel paradox is both accepted (Pankton fails to rematerialize in

how own) and avoided (overall the present doesn't change a bit); and how the alleged alteration of history sometimes seems no more than mere acceleration. To abuse Ernst Haeckel, the ontogeny of the solitary narrative anticipates the phylogeny of the genre.

Ultimately, this serves to illustrate that while Alternate History did grow out of American SF, this was not a necessary development.⁸ It could have originated elsewhere. Thus the sense of regret that Wesseling attributed to Alternate History, the recognition that in any given moment history contains a multitude of divergent possibilities that far exceed whatever happens to come about, also applies to *literary* history. If SF, a genre that exploits the divide between what is and what could be, is caught between definitions what it is or what it could (and maybe should) be, then Alternate History, which exploits the divide between what was and what could have been, ultimately can only be fully understood if that which was written is contrasted with that which could have been written. To fully grasp its potential we need an alternate history of Alternate History.

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⁸ Cf. Karl Michael Armer's afterword to a German-language collection of alternate histories: "Alternativweltgeschichten [wurden (und werden)] überwiegend von Science Fiction-Autoren oder zumindest im Umfeld der Science Fiction-Literatur verfaßt. Das hat sich so ergeben, ohne rechte Logik. Alternativwelten sind an sich kein genuines Science Fiction-Thema. Allerdings werden häufig Zeitreisende als Deus ex machina benutzt, die in der Zeit zurückgehen und die alternative Historie einleiten bzw. verhindern. Und Zeitreisen und Zeitmaschinen sind ein klassisches Science Fiction-Thema. Vermutlich besteht auch zwischen den gedachten Zukunftswelten der SF und den gedachten Geschichtsentwürfen der Alternativweltliteratur eine innere Affinität" (Armer 472-73). While it is important to stress the contingent relationship between SF and Alternate History, it strikes me as hasty to remove evolutionary logic from the domain of *rechte Logik* especially after having claiming an inner affinity between utopian and uchronian writing.

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