

War, Counterfactual History, and Alternate-History Novels

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‘What if Grant had been drinking at Appomattox?’ asked James Thurber in the *New Yorker* in 1930. That might have changed the history of the entire nation, he excitedly opined, and then went on to outline a ludicrous scenario in which the blotto Grant rises unsteadily and hands over his own sword to Lee when that general comes to surrender. Oops!

- 1 Mike Resnick, ed., *Alternate Kennedys* (New York, 1992)
- 2 Ward Moore, *Bring the Jubilee* (London, 1981 [1952]), all quotations are from this edition; Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (New York, 1974 [1962]), all quotations are from this edition.

Thurber was satirizing a little spattering of lately published counterfactual historical essays reversing the outcome of the Civil War, the most notable of which was Winston Churchill’s playful ‘If Lee had not Won the Battle of Gettysburg’. In 1930 such suppositions were rarely seen in reputable publications, and so they were an obvious target of ridicule.

Today, though, counterfactuals (that is, hypothetical propositions that are contrary to the known facts of the historical record) are frequently used to initiate exercises in historical speculation, which are sometimes called ‘what if’ histories. Counterfactuals, we are told by historians who use them, must be plausible and should appear as real options in the historical record, and even when they are used to launch elaborate narratives, which are sometimes called ‘alternate histories’ or, more grammatically, ‘alternative histories,’ or (neo-logistically) ‘allo-histories’, plausibility should be maintained. We have all encountered these allo-histories, in which a slight change in circumstances sets off a chain reaction that takes the course of history in a direction dramatically different from that of actual events. Think, for example, of the annual November speculations in American newspapers about how United States history might have been if JFK had survived Oswald’s

bullets. Although many newspapers dropped this feature after the fortieth anniversary of the assassination in 2003, you can still indulge your counterhistorical appetite for them in a volume entitled, simply, *Alternate Kennedys*.¹

In this essay, the nature and history of allo-histories will be examined, as well as their kinship with a form of fiction — the alternate-history *novel* — that began to appear in the US in the 1950s and has grown by increasing magnitudes in each decade since. Three questions will be put to these two forms. First, why do most of them postulate a counterfactual outcome to a war? Second, why has their bulk and prestige grown with such rapidity in the sixty years following the Second World War? And, third, why do so many of them conjecture that the US lost wars it quite decisively won? The novels under examination are Ward Moore’s *Bring the Jubilee* (1952) and Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), and it will be the refrain of my argument that the novels tell us more about the reasons for our counterhistorical imaginings than do the allo-histories themselves.²

In an attempt to explain why most counterfactuals tell alternate stories of

Ulysses S. Grant on the fifty dollar bill, seen through the viewfinder of a television camera, 28 September 2004. Photograph: Mark Wilson/Getty Images.

wars, it is necessary first of all to look more closely at counterfactuals in history. The history of allo-history certainly bears out this generalization. Isaac D'Israeli, the nineteenth-century English writer and father of the Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, is normally said to have inaugurated the genre of alternate history, and he was the first to call attention to it in an 1823 essay titled 'Of a History of Events which have not Happened'. His first and most prominent examples are military.³ The Roman historian Livy, he points out, indulged in a lengthy speculation beginning with the counterfactual that Alexander the Great might have invaded Italy. And in Book IX of Livy's Roman History, we probably do find the first self-conscious and detailed use of alternate history.⁴ Disdaining the Greek supposition that Alexander could have interrupted the growth of the Roman Empire, Livy shows where the Macedonian army would have invaded and ranged itself, where the Roman armies would have been at that moment and how many allies they could call upon. He even compares the two forces' weapons and modes of warfare, and, of course, he compares Alexander's generalship with that of the contemporary Roman generals he would have encountered as he tried to make his way to Rome. The point of the exercise was not only to praise the superiority of Roman armies, but also to bring into comprehensive view the full might of dispersed Roman forces in the time of Alexander.

D'Israeli recommended the use of such counterfactuals in military history precisely for their ability to present new perspectives on the facts, but he had a second motive for proposing their development into longer alternate histories. He thought such exercises, by stressing the contingencies of events and teaching analytical methods, would wean people from believing that the fortunes of war are decided by supernatural powers, be they interfering classical gods or the special providences of Christians,

Muslims, and Jews. D'Israeli, in other words, suggests that the ability to think counterfactually and to construct alternate histories of important wars measures the extent to which a nation's historians have joined secular discipline and have truly broken with the concept that divinely decreed necessity shaped the national past. He thus places counterfactualism at the heart of the modern historical enterprise, in which secular contingency replaces providential necessity.

D'Israeli suggested yet another reason for the mutual attraction between alternate history and military history. In describing Livy's counterfactual digression, D'Israeli describes the historian's behaviour in terms appropriate to a general: Livy 'arranges the Macedonian Army', has a 'momentary panic' when Alexander first comes into Italy, 'cautiously counts the allies', 'descends' to inspect the weapons, and finally 'terminates his fears' by 'triumphantly' 'bringing forth' the Roman generals. D'Israeli thus playfully indicates a special congruence in military history between historical actors and historians. In 1823 he could point only to the ancient example of Livy's digression, but ten years later the first detailed, book-length allo-history appeared in France: *Napoléon et la conquête du monde* by Louis Geoffroy, which opens with Napoleon's decision not to retreat after the burning of Moscow but instead to march on St. Petersburg. This improved strategy allows the emperor to proceed, through several hundred pages of crafty negotiations and imaginary campaigns, to the subjugation of all the world's peoples to a universal, but nevertheless French, monarchy. The delight of applying Napoleonic tactics better than Napoleon himself had done is conspicuous in Geoffroy's exuberant style and his unwillingness to miss any of the apocryphal Napoleon's brilliant military and diplomatic manoeuvres.

Although the first allo-historians, Livy and Geoffroy, gave themselves unusual

- 3 Isaac D'Israeli, 'Of a History of Events which have not Happened', in *A Second Series of Curiosities of Literature: Consisting of Researches in Literary, Biographical, and Political History; of Critical and Philosophical Inquiries; and of Secret History* (London, 1823), 253–68
- 4 Livy, *Historiae Romanae with an English Translation*, 14 vols. trans. B. O. Foster (Cambridge, Mass., 1919–67), vol. 4, 227–41

Leesburg, Virginia: The Confederate Army 1st Louisiana Tiger Rifles march to camp during the First Manassas Civil War Re-enactment, 3 August 2001. Approximately 20,000 people participated in the re-enactment of First Manassas, known as Bull Run to the Northern Union States, the first major battle of the US Civil War on 21 July 1861. Photograph: Paul J. Richards/AFP/Getty Images.



latitude in imitating military planners, their behaviour was not greatly different from normal military historians. The general looking forward and the historian looking backward both assess the dangers, the options and their consequences, and both must have plenty of contingency plans in mind. Military historians routinely reproduce the calculations and decision-making of commanders, entering deeply into their modes of speculation, in addition to describing the course of events. Moreover, since the archives of *modern* wars, especially, bulge with unused plans, even normal historians are drawn into numerous ‘virtual’ battles and campaigns that were thoroughly conceived and in some cases (such as that of the invasion of Japan’s home islands to end the Second World War) meticulously prepared for, but never actualized, and these potential battles not only fill out regular military histories but also inspire the alternate historian. The fullness of modern historical war records, in other words, creates a thick penumbra of possibilities surrounding the actual events, and curiosity about those possibilities grows with their elaboration. Hence there is, for example, a thorough

account of how Germany’s 1940 invasion of Britain would have played out, based on both the German battle plans and the British defence preparations. The education of military leaders, moreover, encourages the alternate-historical imagination, stressing as it does exercises from which students in military schools (and now in some public schools) learn both strategy and the history of warfare. Working with computer models and simulations of past battles and campaigns, students now subtly transform particulars to see what might be learned from modified chains of events. Eventually these students will be able to produce some of the thousands of military scenarios, the imaginary wars, that fill the drawers and the hard drives of the Pentagon. In short, no enterprise in Western culture puts the question ‘What if?’ to both the future and the past more insistently than the military.

Despite the importance of counterfactual imagining in both the conduct and the history of warfare, fully fledged allo-histories like Geoffroy’s used to be primarily the province of journalists and the writers of popular, rather than academic, history;

indeed, one of the early twentieth-century collections of alternate histories, which appeared in 1931, was subtitled *Lapses into Alternate History*. But today, quite respectable historians seem free to describe (sometimes in elaborate detail) how it might have been if only this or that battle had ended differently, this or that assassination had been prevented, this or that dictator had never been born. In the 1960s and 1970s counterfactualism became a debated topic among academic historians rather than just a trivial pastime, what E. H. Carr once dismissively called ‘the parlour game of might have beens’. New statistical techniques developed in the sixties gave a boost to counterfactual arguments in (of all places) social and economic history, allowing, for example, Robert Fogel to calculate that, had the US railways not been built, the Gross National Product in 1890 would have been only slightly lower than it actually was.⁵ Geoffrey Hawthorn, whose essays in *Plausible Worlds* come closer to narrative allo-histories, statistically undid the Black Death and imagined the cultural and intellectual effects of the demographic alteration in Europe.⁶ Although counterfactual speculations remain highly controversial among historians, the technical virtuosity of such studies has gained them new respect, and historians now at least discuss counterfactuality with the gravity appropriate to methodological issues.

The objections remain, however, and to give a better idea of them, a clearer description of the structure of counterfactual speculation is necessary. Because allo-histories trace out, by some statistical or narrative process, the trajectory of untaken paths, their chronotope, their temporal pattern, resembles a bifurcating line — something like a capital Y. Time’s arrow points upward, through a unified root or trunk of historical development to a juncture at which a rupture occurs and the branches diverge; the juncture is the critical moment (sometimes called the nexus) imagined by

the historian. Branch A (actual history) is generally taken for granted as the implicit comparative ground against which Branch B (counterfactual history) comes into view. For historians who oppose counterfactual history (and there are many), its most objectionable trait is its assumption that history could be conceived as a completely unified actuality at Time 1 and then reconceived as branches at Time 2, even though Branch B is understood to be merely in the conditional mood. The philosopher Benedetto Croce saw in this problem of the logical transition from Time 1 to Time 2, an illicit division of historical material into the necessary and the contingent:

Under the sign of this ‘if’, one fact in a narrative is graded as necessary and another one as accidental, and the second is mentally eliminated in order to espy how the first would have developed along its own lines if it had not been disturbed by the second.⁷

Croce, in other words, objected to the fact that the stem of the Y is simply given as necessary, in the sense that all past events are ‘necessary’ because they happened, whereas something conceptually deletable, and therefore *historically* contingent (an oxymoron, according to Croce), is posited at the Y’s juncture.

Croce may have misunderstood the type of analysis counterfactual historians undertake, but his criticism nevertheless helps us to understand why so many of these exercises take war, with its demonstrably contingent events, as their cruces. The preference for the combination of contingency and world-historical importance draws writers of allo-histories to all that is unpredictable, even implausible, in wars: to crucial battles between well-matched forces (such as the battles of Waterloo and Gettysburg), or to such mere (from a human point of view) randomness as the outbreak of the mysterious disease that decimated the

5 Robert W. Fogel, *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History* (Baltimore, 1964)

6 Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1993)

7 Benedetto Croce, ‘“Necessity” in History’, in *Philosophy, Poetry, History: An Anthology of Essays*, trans. Cecil Sprigge (London, 1966), 557. For a more up-to-date discussion of the uses and problems of counterfactual history, see ‘Counterfactual History: A Forum’, *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society*, 4, 5 (2004), 11–32.

- 8 Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (New York, 2000)
- 9 Robert Cowley, ed., *What If: The World's Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (New York, 2000), xiii

Assyrian force laying siege to Jerusalem in 701 BCE. What if that enigmatic microbe had not appeared then and there, would there have been Judaism, monotheism, Christianity, Islam? To be sure, a growing number of these studies are now focusing on momentous *decisions*, implying that human agents are, at Time 1, undetermined in their choices and faced with real options, which the historian should try to re-create, along with their probable alternative consequences. In these allo-histories, conscious human deliberation, rather than accident, provides the contingency effect and allows for the branching at Time 2. Histories such as Niall Ferguson's *Pity of War* use counterfactuality (suppose that diplomat A had played his cards differently) to illustrate that human decision-makers, not wholly constrained by external conditions, shaped history at certain junctures and could have shaped it otherwise.⁸ In the wake of the US elections in November 2006, Americans are intensely engaged in counterhistorical exercises about who is responsible for having misled US citizens into the disastrous war in Iraq. And these arguments regarding pre-war decision-making must also be counted among the military stories. The vast majority of allo-historians, though, are less interested in policy than in tactics and they prefer a tight nexus, so they tend to develop the implications of the alternate outcome of a single battle, the vagaries of the weather, or the accidental death, assassination, or failure to be born of a single world leader whose presence or absence would change our military history. As Robert Cowley, the respected historian of the Second World War, has pointed out, 'Nothing is more suited to "what if" speculation than military history, where chance and accident, human failings or strengths, can make all the difference.'⁹

We have, then, several reasons for the predominance of war stories among alternate histories. Wars are believed to be full of unpredictable turning points, meeting the criteria of both contingency and plausibility;

wars have long-range and wide-spread ramifications that affect all citizens in the nation, meeting the criterion of self-evident significance; and military histories themselves often stress not only the importance of contingency but also the vastness of the catalogue of alternatives used in planning. Add to these the obvious advantages that 1) most people know who won the major wars their countries fought, so readers will not become confused, and 2) readers are often attracted to histories with plenty of hectic and lethal action, and the predominance of military allo-histories seems almost inevitable. Assembling pieces of the post-war context allows us to see what stimulated the counterfactual imagination in the last half of the twentieth century. First, the development of alternative scenarios is an increasingly important activity in military institutions; we might also speculate that the Cold War draft, which gave a large percentage of young American men a taste of war-game training (many of them as non-commissioned officers), might also have helped spread those habits of thought into the civilian world. Meanwhile, among professional historians, breakthroughs in statistics and computing technology were eroding the resistance to counterfactualism in other fields of history, which seems to have encouraged more academic military historians to try alternate-history speculations.



Not all wars are equally interesting to alternate-history writers, however, and Americans seem fixated on two in particular: the Civil War and the Second World War. The remainder of this essay will be given over to analyses of one alternate-history novel dealing with each war: Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, which is concerned with the Civil War; and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, which is concerned with the Second World War. The analyses will be used to continue elaborating the post-war context and as an aid to answering

the second and third questions about what drove the genre's proliferation and why writers kept returning to the fantasy that the US lost both wars. The answers to those questions, as noted earlier, seem especially visible in the alternate-history *novels*. And so an outline follows of the differences between the sorts of allo-histories mentioned so far, and the novels that begin with similar premises, moving very fast through the most obvious generic differences and then slowing down when the structural distinctions that call for discussions of these particular novels and their contexts are reached.

The narrator's persona is probably the reader's first signal of generic difference. Allo-history writers normally pretend to be writing histories and imitate the historian's conventional expository style. Often they lay down rules in opening paragraphs, as in this introduction to an essay by Civil War historian Stephen Sears: 'Without improbably distorting actual events ... and without putting unspoken words into the mouths of the actors, then, imagine that this ... critical Civil War moment ... turned out [differently].'¹⁰ He then goes on to narrate the allo-history in the past indicative. Allo-historians recount the action from the most objective perch possible, eschewing any stationary participant's point of view, and they base all conclusions about private consciousness on the (real or pretended) historical record. Kenneth Macksey's *Invasion*, for instance, starts off with a god's-eye view of England in the early days of the supposed German invasion by citing passages from the invented diary of a crew member in a German reconnaissance aircraft.¹¹

The novelists, on the other hand, use the characteristic narrative features of fiction. Their narrators have full access to other consciousnesses; they frequently manipulate point of view and focus; they use free indirect style, along with its peculiar tenses, etcetera. These conspicuous differences conform to the genres' separate purposes.

Alternate-history novels attempt to create a complete alternative reality, presenting in detail the social, cultural, technological, psychological, and emotional totalities that result from the alteration, which is why they are often called 'alternate *world* novels'. The historical alteration in the novels permeates to the level of commonplace individual lives, where habits of thought, modes of speech, and routines of daily life are registered.

And, it almost goes without saying, in the novels the private and subjective ramifications of the alterations are explored through the normal novelistic devices of creating fictional characters integrated into plots that layer personal and national history. Allo-histories, on the other hand, seldom strive to imagine an entire social world, and they normally get along without fictional characters, although they sometimes provide historical personages with new scripts, taking care to remain true to the personalities as depicted in the history books. We might say that the novels give readers of alternate histories the same things that historical novels give readers of regular histories: a sense of what human qualities would be encouraged or discouraged; of how things would look, smell, taste, sound, and feel; how the alternate power relations and technologies would be experienced; etcetera. For example, Robert Childan in *The Man in the High Castle*, is an American businessman who caters to the alternate San Francisco's upper class: wealthy Japanese occupiers who buy 'Americana', the scarce remnants of pre-war popular American culture, like Mickey Mouse watches, Civil War posters, and old jazz records. Childan behaves obsequiously and strives to imitate what the book presents as refined 'Japanese' attitudes and manners. He speaks and even thinks in a 'Japanese' English idiom, from which articles and prepositions are frequently dropped. Usually suffering from acute feelings of anxiety and insecurity in relation to his Japanese customers, he is easily shamed, but occasionally vestiges of

10 Stephen Sears, 'The Confederate Cannae and Other Scenarios: How the Civil War Might have Turned Out Differently', in Cowley, *What If*, 241

11 Kenneth Macksey, *Invasion: The German Invasion of England, July 1940* (New York, 1980), 11–13

Edward, Duke of Windsor (1894–1972) with Nazi officers after his abdication. Photograph: Central Press/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.



his pre-conquest sense of racial superiority emerge. Childan is a portrait of the typical American forced to behave as the occupied Japanese actually did — politely — while suffering personal and national shame. The hero of *Bring the Jubilee*, Hodge Backmaker, also registers the subjective state of the conquered. He struggles against the backwardness, racism, anti-intellectualism, and perpetual indebtedness of the citizens in the conquered twenty-six United States of America. Like his fellow-citizens, he is emotionally numb but at least he has inherited from a maverick grandfather some intellectual ambition, which is almost impossible to satisfy in an early twentieth-century US without proper universities, publications, or transportation. Robert Childan and Hodge Backmaker, in short, are supposed to embody their allo-historical situations. You now have some plot information, but the argument in which it was wrapped is simply this: allo-histories

adhere to the conventions of history-writing and alternate-history novels conform to the conventions of novels.

Structural dissimilarities also follow a pattern, and in the course of examining them, the second question will begin to be answered: Why does the novelistic genre, almost unknown until the 1950s, become rapidly popular after the Second World War? Without giving away too much, let me anticipate my conclusion now by saying that both these novels can be read as attempts to assess just what it was the US won in that war. They were popular and are durable because they ask important questions — such as, are the American people living according to the principles for which they fought? And have they achieved the peace they anticipated?

Both alternate-history forms, as mentioned earlier, contain a crucial single moment,

which serves both as a nexus linking the accepted past with the hypothesized alternative and as a point of departure separating the true from the altered. But the novelists and allo-historians use the pattern quite differently. Most noticeably, the novelists often accord both of the branches of the Y equal ontological weight inside the fiction. Instead of merely claiming, as the historians do explicitly or implicitly, that both branches are equally *plausible*, the novels often present them as equally *true* within the diegesis. That is why they are often categorized as fantasy or science fiction. The alleged equivalence of the prongs of the fork is easiest to see in Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, where the first sentences present the entire narrative as the solution to a temporal enigma: 'Although I am writing this in the year 1877, I was not born until 1921. Neither the dates nor the tenses are error — let me explain: ...'¹² The explanation is that Hodge, seeking community and enlightenment, takes refuge from the chaos, bitterness, and depression of the conquered US on a commune in Pennsylvania founded two generations earlier by a former officer in the Confederate Army. There he becomes a historian of the Civil War, or as it is called in the alternate reality, the War of Southron Independence; he has a long, tortured relationship with a neurotic but brilliant physicist (this novel's version of a 'mad' scientist) who eventually figures out how to interface the space-time nexus with the matter-energy nexus, sending Hodge back in time to the Battle of Gettysburg, where he is careful to 'do nothing' to change the outcome. Ironically, by doing nothing, remaining silent when asked a crucial question about whether or not Union troops have moved up to the Round Tops that overlook the field, Hodge starts a panic among the Confederate troops, who were just about to occupy that high ground themselves. They not only beat a disorderly retreat from the orchard, leaving the little hills available for the Union forces, but also cause the accidental death

of their commander, who happens to be the grandfather of the physicist. So no physicist, no time machine, and Hodge is therefore stranded in an 'elsewhen' (otherwise known as 'OTL' or 'Our Time Line'). We should note that although Moore's means of conveying his protagonist to the battle is certainly fantastic, what happens to him there is highly plausible. More to the point, however, is that the fiction represents both alternatives as solid realities. The rupture in the chronotope does not cancel the diegetic fact that Hodge inhabited the ATL (or Alternate Time Line).

Philip K. Dick's use of the two branches of the Y pattern is subtler than Moore's. In fact, one might argue that it is gratuitous, but we often see obedience to a formal imperative most clearly in fictional events that have no apparent reason for being there. In one such scene, Dick has his protagonist, Mr. Tagomi, accidentally transport himself into the actual San Francisco of 1962. Confused, Tagomi at first reflects: 'Mad dream. ... The whole vista has dull, smoky, tomb-world cast. Smell of burning. Dim gray buildings, sidewalk, peculiar harsh tempo in people. And ... no pedicabs. ... Only cars and buses. Cars like brutal big crushers, all unfamiliar in shape.'¹³ Contemporary readers of *The Man in the High Castle* would have known Tagomi had stumbled into our world because one of the first sights he sees is a 'hideous misshapen thing on the skyline. Like nightmare of roller coaster suspended, blotting out view. Enormous construction of metal and cement in air.'¹⁴ This satiric description of San Francisco's despised Embarcadero Freeway (finally torn down after the 1989 earthquake), combined with the concentration on dirt, smog, anxiety, noise, and incivility in Tagomi's perceptions, not only undercut the reader's assumption that real history is superior in all respects to the imagined alternative but also materialize the other branch of the alternate-history chronotope.

12 Moore, *Bring the Jubilee*, 1

13 Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*, 222

14 Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*, 222

- 15 Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Garden of the Forking Paths', in Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, eds., *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writing* (New York, 1964), 26
- 16 Moore, *Bring the Jubilee*, 142

This Y-shaped chronotope in which the branches are equally plausible is familiar to contemporary readers from a couple of other contexts, which are here quickly described in order to fill out the intellectual world of these novels. Popular science fans might recognize an illustration of Hugh Everett's 'superspace', in which parallel realities proliferate. Dick borrows in this passage from the 'multiverse' explanation of the behaviour of quantum entities. Based on the mathematics of quantum mechanics, the theory is one of a number used to explain the uncanny behaviour of quantum entities when their wave-functions 'collapse' and the various possibilities they contain are resolved into a single outcome. The multiverse interpretation of their behaviour holds that *all possible outcomes always occur, each one in a separate universe*, but our observation is limited to the one outcome in the universe we inhabit. Given the overlapping readerships of popular science and science fiction, it is not surprising that Moore and Dick would make gestures toward multiverse theory.

We can see the same bifurcating time lines, moreover, in post-modernist formal narrative experiments of the sort that Jorge Luis Borges inaugurated in 'The Garden of the Forking Paths' in the late 1930s (not long after the multiverse theory was first developed). Borges's story (like Dick's) deals with a spy who knows the target of an air attack and is on an assassination mission. When he confronts the man he's supposed to kill, however, the spy becomes uncertain, and his target relieves him by letting him know that he is not in a traditional story where 'each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others'. Instead, he is in a story where 'he chooses — simultaneously — all of them. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork.'¹⁵ *The Man in the High Castle*, imitating Borges, even hints at a proliferation of universes

by furnishing the alternate reality with a novelist who has written an alternate-history novel, called *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, in which the Allies won the war. Placed in these contexts, it would seem that the alternate-history novelists, although they parted ways with the allo-historians by affirming the equal reality of each alternative, were nevertheless keeping respectable intellectual company in the 1950s and 1960s.

They also had, though, what seems to be a more urgent reason for maintaining the parity of the alternatives: both works emphasize that their alternate worlds closely resemble some important aspects of current American reality. The defeated US in *Bring the Jubilee* is a nightmare version of the worst aspect of the Southern states during and after the Great Depression. It is a rural society in which most farmers are share-croppers; it is obsessed with racial separation, a fact that one character explains as the natural consequence of having 'lost a war, the most important war in our history' to end black slavery; African Americans were therefore viewed as the source of all the impoverished whites' misery.¹⁶ The US is plagued by lynchings, is isolationist and narrowly provincial. Politically, its voters veer between electing oligarchic 'gentlemen' who sell them out, and demagogic 'populists' who cater to all of their prejudices. There is even a terrorist organization, like the Ku Klux Klan, which abducts and murders blacks and interfering foreigners. The educational system lags far behind the standard of the industrial South, where the wealthiest families send their sons to college. To be sure, the alternate Northron America is not an exact replica of the actual South, but an allegorical exaggeration, just as the novel's Southron America, with its emancipated but disenfranchised blacks, its advanced technologies, military and industrial imperialism, and international ambitions, is a caricature of the North. But

the similarities are pointed enough to make the reader think that the alternate world in which Hodge grows up is really the South of OTL. In order to read the novel as the social commentary it clearly is, in other words, we have to recognize that both branches of the fork are simultaneously ‘true’: there is a world like Hodge’s, and that world is the South. We might, therefore, see another chronotope shadowing the alternate-history/actual-history bifurcation: the history of the US up until the failure of Reconstruction is figured in parallel lines, one for slave states, one for free. At the end of the Civil War there is a brief period of conjunction, after which there really are two countries with different time lines: one relatively static and the other more progressive. The ending of Hodge’s narrative, supposedly written in OTL 1877, makes this point obvious: ‘There are rumors of a deal between northern Republicans and southern Democrats, betraying the victory of the Civil War ... in return for the presidency. If this is true, my brave new world is not so brave. ... It may not be so new either.’¹⁷ These last words of Hodge Backmaker provide an answer to the third question — Why imagine that the US lost the Civil War? — for they convert the alternate-history speculation, that perhaps the South was not defeated, into a historical fact.

Moreover, the novel’s main themes point directly to the most widely publicized ways in which the South defeated its defeat: racial separation and educational deprivation. The one political sentiment that engages Hodge’s passion is civil rights for black Americans, and the abiding ambition of his life is to acquire an education, and the novel gives us a complex interweaving of these two strands of the plot, too complex to be outlined here. Suffice it to say that Hodge’s poverty threatens to deprive him of an education, while consorting with a black man ostracizes him socially. The joining of these two issues registers the immediate context of the novel’s composition and publication (in 1950–52). A number of widely discussed legal cases

challenging Jim Crow laws came before the Federal courts in those few years, and the most pivotal charged that African Americans in many Southern states were denied an education equal to that of their white fellow-citizens. In the case of *Sweatt v. Painter*, a suit involving the University of Texas Law School in 1950, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favour of the anti-segregationists, and that was the prelude to the court’s landmark ruling in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The last sentences of *Bring the Jubilee* acknowledge that historical turning points can be reversed, and therefore a real-life version of time-travel does exist. Replete with allusions to the turning point in North/South and black/white relations taking place at the moment of its production, Moore’s novel seems to be both celebrating and issuing a warning: that we will have to be vigilant lest history repeat itself by *again* reversing itself.

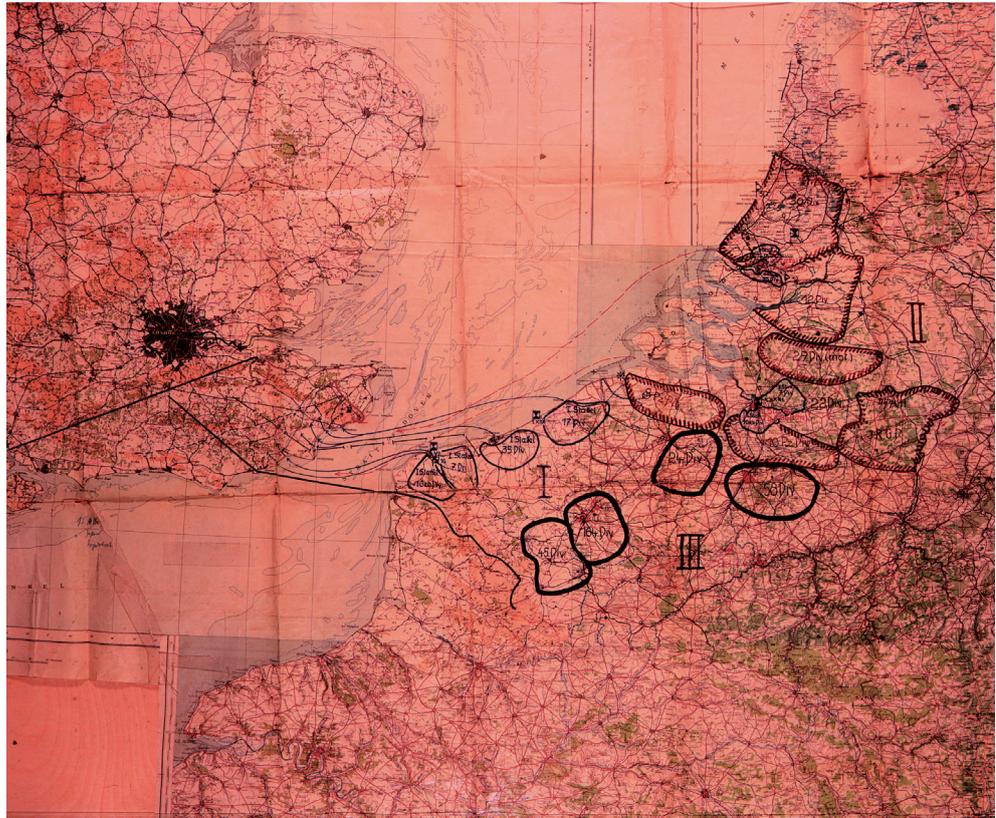
In summary, unlike the allo-historians, the alternate-history novelists posit the ontological parity of the forks of the Y in order to indicate that their alternate worlds actually refer to our social reality and, in doing so, they reveal the contexts for the appearance of the form in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, one science-fiction writer has gone so far as to claim that alternate-fiction novels appeared in America in the last decades of the twentieth century because that was the period in which American history began to be reconceptualized in the light of the experience of ethnic and racial minorities.¹⁸ *Bring the Jubilee* is certainly an important piece of evidence for that thesis.

But there are other contexts as well, which might best be viewed through another of the *structural* differences separating alternate-history novels and allo-histories: they deploy the convention of the nexus very differently. Alternate-history writers put their nexus in prominent places: it might come in the middle of the work, the narrator moving toward the point of departure for

17 Moore, *Bring the Jubilee*, 192

18 Brian Stableford, quoted in Eric B. Henriot, *L’Histoire revisitée: Panorama de l’uchronie sous toutes ses formes* (Amiens, 2004), 112.

Plans for a German invasion of Britain. Photograph: The Art Archive.



- 19 James M. McPherson, 'If the Lost Order hadn't been Lost: Robert E. Lee Humbles the Union, 1862', in Cowley, *What If*, 232
- 20 McKinley Kantor, *If the South had Won the Civil War* (New York, 2001), 13

some while along a familiar path, even covering the very ground of the nexus itself before backing up slightly, as does James McPherson in a Civil War narrative: 'The odds [he announces] against the [actual] sequence of events [just recounted] must have been a million to one [these have to do with the loss of General Lee's Special Order No. 191]. Much more in line with the laws of probability [McPherson continues] is the following scenario'.¹⁹ Or they might begin with the nexus, as does McKinley Kantor: 'The death of Major General U. S. Grant came as a sickening shock to those Northerners who had held high hopes for a successful campaign in the West — for the reduction of Port Hudson and Vicksburg and the freeing of the Mississippi River from Confederate domination'.²⁰

Allo-histories do not, like *Bring the Jubilee*, conceal the departure until the

end, making it the central mystery of the book. Moore, however, uses the nexus as the climax, the moment we have been waiting for throughout the novel in order to make sense of his 'preposterous' opening sentence. Dick pays almost no attention to the nexus moment in *The Man in the High Castle*, but he nevertheless seems to recognize his generic obligation to produce one. He casually slips the nexus into a conversation that takes place well into the novel. At the point of its identification, all the major characters have been introduced, our attention is focused on their parallel but intertwining plots, and we may even have given up the expectation of a counterfactual nexus, so its appearance seems almost a gratuitous narrative sidebar. Moments in which characters must tell each other the history they are all tacitly supposed to share are by definition annoyingly contrived. Dick tries to minimize the awkwardness by

presenting the departure moment during a counterfactual speculation voiced by a minor character who seems to have been introduced mainly to offer it, although she is merely giving the summary of the plot of the novel-within-the-novel, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, which later also diverges from actual events: '[The] theory is that Roosevelt would have been a terribly strong President. As strong as Lincoln. ... [If] Roosevelt isn't assassinated in Miami; he goes on and is reelected in 1936, so he's President when Germany attacks England and France and Poland.'²¹ The nexus — the assassination of Roosevelt — is predictable, but it still needed to be stated.

In these quite different ways, Moore and Dick signal that their novels will concentrate on the world produced by a Confederate or an Axis victory rather than on *how* those victories came about. Whereas the allo-histories are often war stories in the most concrete sense, the best of the novels tend instead to ponder life in the aftermath. And this brings us once again to the third question about why victory is imaginatively turned into defeat: Why in the post-war period did we begin imaginatively to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory? Previously, allo-historical imaginings often took the wishful form of 'if only' fantasies, like Geoffroy's apocryphal Napoleon or any one of the pro-Confederate replays of various battles that were published between 1905 and 1930. In the post-Second World War period, we see a rise in the percentage of 'what if' speculations written on the assumption that the alternative was not preferable. No doubt in the first decades after the war, especially as the public gained a clearer sense of the horrors perpetrated by Nazi Germany, imagining an Axis victory allowed some Americans to express their new sense of the extent of the disaster averted; as in the wake of a traumatic near-encounter with death, people talk over how close they came to annihilation. No doubt, too, writers who drew dystopian portraits

of life after a Confederate victory, like Ward Moore, were also partly motivated by a desire to prove that *it could have* happened in the US: in his alternate Americas there are massacres and expulsions of Jews and Asians, as well as African Americans.

If the emotional tone of some alternate histories and alternate-history novels is relief, though, the most widely and continuously read of the novels, as has been demonstrated in the case of *Bring the Jubilee*, keep a strong sense of the continuing presence of the danger. In the aftermath of the most destructive and world-altering war ever fought, these novelists keep alive the issue of who wins the peace. Moore strongly suggested that the South, after a short interval, succeeded in becoming a separate polity, and Dick also points, at the conclusion to *The Man in the High Castle*, to a similar irony regarding the aftermath of the war in the Pacific. In that novel the Japanese rule is already threatened by their former allies', the Nazis', lust for world domination. The Germans are about to attempt to annihilate their Asian allies in a sneak nuclear attack. The fantasy, therefore, makes America's nuclear attacks on just two cities look benign in comparison to what the Nazis *would have done*. Moreover, the thesis that the Japanese were winners as well as victims harmonizes with the consensus view in both countries by the 1960s: that Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida was prescient when he claimed that it was possible to lose a war and yet win a peace. *The Man in the High Castle* illustrates the corollary point: that it would have been possible for Japan to win the war and yet lose the peace. At its ending, Dick reveals that the alternate-history novel-within-the-novel, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, in which America and Britain are imagined to have won the war but also to be fighting each other ten years later, possesses 'inner truth': in some 'essential' way Germany and Japan lost the war. Extrapolating (as we are clearly supposed to) to the alternate-history novel we are reading,

21 Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*, 61

it follows that its 'inner truth' is that, in some 'essential' way, the Allies lost the war. They lost, the novel implies, because seventeen years after the cessation of the Second World War, before and during the Cuban missile crisis, the victors appeared to be on the brink of mutual destruction through nuclear war. Dick implies that America and the Soviet Union lost the war because they never really ceased to be at war. If American citizens thought that winning the war would give them peaceful security, their expectations were disappointed. It was the winners, not the losers of the Second World War, the novel bitterly concludes, who were condemned to permanent states of war.

These novels remind us that the era of the Cold War, containing the struggle to end

segregation, was a prolonged aftermath like none before it; amidst Americans' guilt, fears, anxieties, consciousness of gross racial injustice, continuing wars and constant alerts at home about how to protect themselves against the nuclear genie they had let out of the bottle, it was difficult for many fully to realize that they were supposed to be in a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity. Counterfactual narratives in which *just* wars are refought and lost were ways of coping with their difficulty. And within those texts, the alternate-history novels especially reveal the troubled historical situation that produced them. These novels are powerful reminders that, despite the unconditional surrender of America's enemies, justice and peace still eludes its people. ■