



Introduction: Counterfactual Romanticism

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The Counterfactual Angel

Walter Benjamin's great, final crisis-document of early 1940, the twenty numbered paragraphs comprising his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', offers a cryptic critique of historicism, specifically of the determinism, continuum mentality and narrative of progress articulated by Marxist historical materialism. The document's most creative and conceptually troubling moment is the ekphrastic angelology provided in the ninth thesis, in which Benjamin famously offers an interpretation of Paul Klee's watercolour, *Angelus Novus* (1920), which he had owned since 1921. In subdued browns, yellows and auburn tones, Klee's childlike drawing depicts a long-faced, winged figure with scroll-like tresses and large eyes in an indeterminate attitude of flight and/or fright. Benjamin sees the figure disposed 'as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating'; 'This', he continues, 'is how one pictures the angel of history'. He proceeds to historicise this seemingly ahistorical, impossible figure, in the process temporalising and spatialising the position of the reader/viewer:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.¹

However, the angelic figure seems incapable of resisting a 'storm' that 'is blowing from Paradise'; his wings are useless, and the tempest 'propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skywards'. This ninth thesis concludes: 'This

storm is what we call progress.² The image, and Benjamin's personal and philosophical inhabitation of it, have been subject to much discussion. Commentators have focused on what appears to be Benjamin's thwarted messianism at this juncture of Nazi terror, captured in the baffled angel's desire for a disruptive intervention that would call time on the cataclysmic amassing of wreckage on wreckage – an appeal, as Alan Wall sees it, redemptively 'to fracture the continuum into consciousness' and adopt a new relation and agency vis-à-vis the past and future.³ Describing Klee's image, mediated through Benjamin, as 'an icon of the left', Otto Karl Werckmeister notes:

It has seemed to hold out an elusive formula for making sense of the senseless, for reversing the irreversible, while being subject to a kind of ideological brooding all the more protracted the less promising the outlook for political practice appears to be. Through the stream of its exegesis, Benjamin's suggestive visual allegory has become a meditative image – an *Andachtsbild* – for a dissident mentality vacillating between historical abstraction and political projection, between despondency and defiance, between challenge and retreat.⁴

The interruption of process prompted by the angel's resurrectionary hunger; the new relation with time and the sense of agency this would imply; an acknowledgement of the 'horror' of what Benjamin in thesis VII sees as the 'triumphal procession' of 'cultural treasures' that are contingent debris rather than a chain of historically *necessary* (in all senses) relics, entailed to us; the defamiliarisation of what in thesis VIII is described as the 'historical norm'; the dissatisfaction with what is found piled randomly before one's feet; the rejection of teleology (itself a theodicy); and the desire no longer to fetishise 'enslaved ancestors' (whose eventual victory is naively assumed) but rather to action, now, the ideal of emancipated heirs – these (and not some all-solving apocalypse founded on quietism) seem to be what is striven for in the teeth of that hegemonic wind that ultimately blows the angel, and history itself, back and unseeing into its own future.⁵

There is, however, another angel – an *Angelus Redivivus*, one might say, who has always been with us as Romantics. It is one of Blake's angels – very much like a devil – represented in Plate 10 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93; see Figure 0.1) beneath the final nine 'Proverbs of Hell'. This, I propose, is our own icon, the Counterfactual Angel. He is engaged in the work of prompting a radically defamiliarised relation to history and its relics and 'exploding' the 'continuum of



0.1 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93), Plate 10

history'. He does so by foregrounding the historical accidents that we regard as linear entailments and by revealing the contingency that creates, and continues to shadow, the objects we fetishise as teleologically received (even if – or perhaps especially when – we 'discover' them in the archive).⁶ Never merely frivolous, and a hater of fake news, he is busy troubling ideas of continuity, lineage and inheritance in both historical and literary-historical spheres. His project is to reveal the plenitude of a field to which Romanticism – despite (because of) its governing

historicist orthodoxy – has insufficiently attended: that which did not happen. He inhabits a quantum universe (a version of Blakean Eternity, similarly opposed to an Urizenic philosophy/historiography of the Five Senses) in which *what ifs*, *might-have-beens* and *but fors* energise, clarify and render spectral the world we inhabit and the history we live.

Blake's revisionary demonology gives us (in the Fitzwilliam Museum copy) an image of a kneeling, verdigris-toned, crimson-winged male, flanked by two female figures, both of whom are writing. An unfurled scroll – history's supposed record, I suggest, rendered deviously serpent-like in form – is open before him; he points questioningly to a particular detail. The red-gowned figure to his right – whose work the angel-devil is challenging – is hunched over conventional historicist work. Her very form is monolithic. The angel has already emancipated the other figure, on his left – the creative-critical counterfactual historiographer, for whom history is not a flat surface or continuum (witness the shape the historical 'archive' takes in front of her) but rather a more complex field of scrolled foldings (indeed, like the tresses of Klee's angel). She leans over in the hope of being witness to the moment at which her red-gowned fellow historiographer's consciousness of history is exploded, her relation to the past (which she seems at present to be diligently 'receiving', not remaking) is reconfigured. Blake has disposed the already-liberated figure in such a way as to mirror the openness and receptivity of the angel-devil; hope for a similar transformative vision for the red-gowned figure is suggested in the cactus-like growth next to her, which – through crabbed and defensive – at least echoes the form of the angel-devil's wings.

I see our Counterfactual Angel pointing to an incident in the record that need not necessarily have been so, that might have been otherwise, that occurred and was inherited only through a process of historical contingency and whose form and significance remain conditioned and shadowed by what did not come to pass. He is identifying the multiple potentialities of history's field that flank and ghost (and thus ironise and relativise) the relics (cultural, literary, historical) that the red-gowned writer still insists on receiving as necessary entailments, determined for us by a conception of (literary) history as a chain. Such a view of history is one of the 'strait roads' referred to in Blake's proverb. The angel is pointing out how 'crooked' all history's roads actually are, and does so under another of the Proverbs of Hell that is now to be read ironically: 'Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believ'd'.

This image of Romanticism's Counterfactual Angel illustrates the effects and affordances of the creative-critical counterfactual literary his-

toriography that this present volume performs. These can be identified as the following: a hypersensitivity and openness to contingency, alterity and variability, and a scepticism regarding the dogma of causality; a humility born of the realisation that the inevitability of the literary history we have inherited is illusory; the salutary uncertainty that proceeds from an awareness that we are misled by our hubris-inspiring position at the latest point of literary reception, to which we mistakenly assume all texts and interpretation have tended; uncanny doubleness; possibility-hood; the multiverse of the material; quantum observation; dissident anachronism; the ironic and spectral; the frisson of a restitutive historical imagination; an acute consciousness of the constructedness of our various Romanticisms; and a dissatisfaction with things-as-they-are (in that talismanic Godwinian phrase).

A fool sees not the same literary history that a wise man sees.

Counterfactual heuristic, counterfactual imagination

Catherine Gallagher has recently charted the genealogy of the ‘counterfactual imagination’ – ‘a certain kind of historical speculation’ – across disciplines, genres and ‘diverse set of venues’.⁷ For Gallagher, the counterfactual is defined as a discourse ‘premised on a counterfactual-historical hypothesis [...] an explicit or implicit past-tense, hypothetical, conditional conjecture pursued when the antecedent condition is known to be contrary to fact’.⁸ A number of insights concerning the use, value and genetics of counterfactual thinking in history and fiction emerge from her case-study-driven map of related modalities of the counterfactual imagination. The latter range from seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century anti-determinist philosophico-theological speculation to critical military history, legal theory and nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative forms of ‘alternate history’ (to which numerous modes of speculative fiction belong) and to which, as Karen Hellekson reminds us, those other terms, ‘allohistory’ and ‘uchronia’, are related.⁹ ‘Counterfactual thought experiments in narrating history’ in a military context reveal knowledge that will be of service in ‘future planning’; today, Gallagher notes, counterfactual analysis ‘tend[s] to cluster in areas where historical data might inform current policy debates’, and it therefore becomes a Janus-faced ‘instrument for shaping history’ and for mapping out what Hellekson terms ‘fictive futures’.¹⁰

What one might call the counterfactual moment or prompt – known in critical counterfactual speculation as the ‘nexus event’ – is identified as emerging when deterministic models of history – fatalism, predestination,

providentialism, necessitarianism, philosophical optimism, teleological histories (Whig, Marxist) and *narrative* itself as a shaping principle – are questioned, and when human agency, responsibility, probability and the consequentiality of different causes are subject to scrutiny.¹¹ Further, Gallagher finds the counterfactual moment to be located ‘at a juncture ... recognized to have been both crucial and underdetermined’ – in other words, a nodal point of uncertainty or paradox where that which seems naturally bequeathed rears up in all its contingency and relativism.¹² Battles (Waterloo as Wellington’s ‘damn close-run thing’) or wars are, of course, prime examples of such a moment, and moment of consciousness. This volume contends that the genesis and reception of literary texts – seemingly far less dramatic a phenomenon – should be seen in the same light. Gallagher also explores the affordances of the ‘story-generating energy of historical counterfactuals’ – the fundamentally creative narrative-spinning stimulus of the ‘what if?’ moment (though it should be noted that Gallagher’s discussion of counterfactual thinking implicitly accepts that its value depends on the plausibility, allowability and probability – all contested categories – of the divergent scenario envisaged). Her analysis of fictions relating to the American Civil War and the Second World War yield the insight that the counterfactual imagination has been used as a politicised, reparative tool in which history’s perceived injustices are remedied. She has elsewhere referred to such a move as an act of ‘undoing’ that offers ‘an enlarged sense of temporal possibility correlating with a newly activist, even interventionist, relation to our collective past’.¹³

Gallagher also offers a kind of phenomenology or psychology of the counterfactual imagination, remarking that the mode ‘helps satisfy our desire to quicken and vivify historical entities, to make them seem not only solid and substantial but also suspenseful and unsettled’.¹⁴ This is particularly insightful, attuned to our residual dissenting instinct to test received pieties, disembalm them, experience them for ourselves and invest them with potential energy rather than with the weight of history. What the counterfactual imagination valorises, Gallagher argues, almost as an aside, is ‘the vitality of the permanently unfinished’ (an apt paradox) – history, in other words, as negotiable fragment and accident, to which the creative-critical imagination is asked to respond with a historical version of Keats’s negative capability and with a relish for what Gallagher has described as ‘the contingency effect’.¹⁵

Mark Salber Phillips has also discussed counterfactualism’s ‘compensatory’ narratives, which offer ‘consolations not present in history itself’.¹⁶

Equally, of course, the counterfactual imagination has posited more catastrophic outcomes, and a number of commentators have acknowledged the 'susceptibility' of counterfactuals – like any other discourse or research tool – to revisionary political agendas across the ideological spectrum (as Jeremy Black remarks: 'It is all too easy to transform the "what if?" into "If only?"').¹⁷ Counterfactual history, for example, has often been seen as alt-right 'retrospective wishful thinking'.¹⁸

Counterfactual reasoning, as Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin note, 'is unavoidable in any field – history, the social sciences (particularly econometrics/cliometrics) – in which researchers want to draw cause–effect conclusions' and 'advance our causal understanding' of events, 'but cannot perform controlled experiments'.¹⁹ Is a hypothesis concerning the significance of a particular cause and historical crux or turning point convincing? To find out, deploy a counterfactual scenario to test the causal concatenation by imagining otherwise. Richard Ned Lebow reminds us that such counterfactual simulations are also a routine evaluative tool in the physical and biological sciences, in which 'researchers routinely use them to develop and evaluate non-linear models'.²⁰ Far from clouding our historical sight and insight, thinking counterfactually – 'retrospective scenario generation' – can function as a useful safeguard against the 'creeping determinism' of what Tetlock and Belkin call 'certainty of hindsight'.²¹ Analysing the logic of plausibility and possibility in the narratives that history and the social sciences construct, Geoffrey Hawthorn similarly asks us not 'cognitively to foreclose' the past.²² Admittedly, this calls for a mental swerve or 'undoing' that may seem – in an age of so-called 'alternative facts' and bogus counterknowledge (something different entirely) – to require being of the devil's party.²³ But the devil is of course an angel; conceiving how things might easily have been otherwise becomes 'a means of preventing the world that did occur from blocking our view of the worlds that might well have occurred if some antecedent condition had taken a different value'.²⁴ Again, our position at the culmination of what seems to be a progressive march of progress, knowledge and causality is the very thing that calls for a 'debiasing effect' that is the result of having sensitised ourselves to 'the causes and contingency of the world' and its complex 'relations of entailment'.²⁵ Such is the power of the tendency to regard what *did* happen as *the only thing that could have happened*, that a number of commentators – alive as they also are to 'the susceptibility of the genre to political agendas' – have emphasised the value of 'high-imaginative-content counterfactuals' that ramify the nexus event into the realm of second- and third-order counterfactuals

and even into the world of 'miracle' counterfactuals, as a way of bringing home to us 'the complex interplay between change and necessity in shaping world history'.²⁶ Steven Weber acknowledges the liberalising and interrogatory value of imagining otherwise: 'Counterfactuals can ... be used to open minds, to raise tough questions about what we think we know'; Mark Turner sees the counterfactual mentality as the product of a fundamentally yoking, non-compartmentalising mechanism termed 'cognitive blending'.²⁷ Both Lebow and Niall Ferguson valuably emphasise how customary (actually) 'imagin[ing] alternative scenarios' is in 'human mental life'.²⁸

Uncanny doubleness is at the heart of the counterfactual imagination and method. Every statement of causality reveals the presence of a counterfactual other. As Hawthorn states, 'the force of an explanation turns on the counterfactual which it implies', and counterfactual imagining 'promises that kind of understanding ... which comes from locating an actual in a space of possibles, showing "the connections it would have to other non-actual things"'.²⁹ There is an energising spectrality to embrace here in the form of a history (still) thronged and indeed conditioned by that which did not happen – a Romanticism, also, whose forms are the *product* of what did not come to pass. Thus 'historical causation' – which issues in literary lives and literary texts as well as in disastrous cavalry charges on the French left flank at Waterloo – gains what Stephen M. Best terms 'a structure of internal difference' through the 'imputation' of a counterfactual, by which past events are relativised, supplemented, creatively estranged, radically contextualised in a field that historicism has yet fully to grasp, and instructively intuited as the *possibilities or imponderables* they once were for the contemporaries who first experienced them.³⁰ What counterfactuals explode are 'fictions of radical presentness'.³¹ A counterfactual, in Mark Salber Phillips's formulation, 'serves as a comment on its double'; this opens up the possibility of historical and literary critique through the affordances of parody and irony – tools that throw the contours of the 'original' into sharper relief.³²

A radical counterfactual Romanticism – as heuristic and research tool – would concern itself not only with the ways in which Romantic-period thinkers and imaginative writers occupied themselves with thinking otherwise but also with extending to the practice of *literary* historiography a concept developed by Gary Saul Morson: 'sideshadowing'. Coined by obvious analogy to 'foreshadowing', 'sideshadowing', in Morson's model, 'conveys the sense that actual events might just as well not have happened' and that 'in an open universe, the illusion is inevitability itself ...

what exists need not have existed'.³³ Morson asks us to hone a peripheral vision – what one might call a sensitivity to penumbras – in which 'the ghostly presence of might-have-beens or might-bes' can be detected and their consequent pressures on the 'received' object or event (or text) calibrated: 'In this way, the hypothetical shows through the actual and so achieves its own shadowy kind of existence in the text.'³⁴ What such a vision reveals is that multiple 'temporalities' contend 'for each moment of actuality'; plural texts jostle – clamour – for recognition in a quantum canon whose extent offers a challenge to New Historicist concepts of 'context' and which raises questions similar to those that have occupied New Historicists as they question how 'context' should be defined and delimited. I suggest that the result of acknowledging such a literary multiverse (predicated on the insight that the 'actual is ... just another possibility that somehow came to pass') would be a refreshing ironisation and delegitimation of that which we assume we have inherited, a new purchase on 'history' and an expansion of horizons whose effects would be as transformative as those of feminism and New Historicism have been in their recuperative reconstruction of the Romantic canon.³⁵ Morson's is the most succinct formulation of the hubris our historical position and governing conceptions of (literary) history – nuanced as they have been by Romantic New Historicism – engender:

When a sequence of events seems so coherent as to be necessary, we are usually deceived by our own presence at the sequence's culmination. The mirage is not other possibilities but the necessity of the actual one. Sideshadowing therefore induces a kind of temporally based humility ... [A] field is mistakenly reduced to a point, and, over time, a succession of fields is reduced to a line. Sideshadowing restores the field.³⁶

While Morson regards parody as '*an unwelcome* [or 'unwanted'] side-shadow', I argue that the extension of his concept of sideshadowing to literary history has the potential to bring into focus a field of 'parodic' shadow-texts whose shapes might very effectively serve to contextualise and highlight the circumstances of the surviving text's own genesis and transmission.³⁷

It is important to note that in the academic and professional disciplines in which it is – in a range of ways – deployed, and in most of the theoretical literature defending its value, counterfactualism labours under 'methodological constraint[s]'.³⁸ In 1961, E. H. Carr famously dismissed counterfactual speculation in historiography as a 'Dodgsonian mode' – a case of frivolously playing 'parlour-games with might-have-beens'.³⁹ This

is an allegation usually pinned on the genre of the speculative essay as showcased in J. C. Squire's *If It Had Happened Otherwise* (1931), whose subtitle – *Lapses Into Imaginary History* – constructs counterfactualism as solecistic postlapsarian play (sin?) even as the volume itself innovatively exposes conventional academic historiography as the creative act it is by allowing the reader, for example, to construct a counterfactual scenario 'through a series of cuttings from [counterfactual] historical texts'.⁴⁰ The spectre (angel–devil) of fast-and-loose fiction is never far away, and so, as already noted, counterfactualism's respectability is usually predicated on canons of plausibility. 'Imagination' is regularly proscribed.⁴¹ (Witness Catherine Gallagher's need to characterise her study of the rich affordances of counterfactuals as 'a non-partisan consideration'.)⁴² Lebow adduces some of the more 'surgical' limitations imposed on counterfactual practice, such as the insistence that counterfactuals be grounded in 'a system of statistical contingency for which we have reasonable evidence' or within 'a general deductive theory with clear microfoundational scope conditions'.⁴³ But, as Lebow remarks, 'Surgical counterfactuals are no more realistic than surgical air strikes.' Quoting Steven Weber, he emphasises that such supposed circumspection merely generates counterfactuals 'close to the margins of existing theories'; that it 'presupposes that we know what "minimal" [change] really means'; and that adherence to what is known as the 'minimal-rewrite rule' radically underestimates the 'multiple consequences' of the smallest temporal inflection, which may give rise to complex 'second-order counterfactuals'.⁴⁴

In his unnecessarily laboured introduction to the edited collection, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (1997), Niall Ferguson, though recognising what H. A. L. Fisher called 'the play of the contingent and the unforeseen', insisted that the counterfactuals 'we need to construct' must be 'simulations based on calculations about the relative probability of plausible outcomes in a chaotic world (hence "virtual history")'.⁴⁵ The tension between the wishful scientism of the core claim and the implications of the concept held in brackets at the end of the sentence – virtuality, with all that that implies concerning our access to the past and historiography's (self-deluding) faith in its ability to find a core 'grammar of events' (Louis Mink's phrase) from the 'causal matrix of history' – is palpable.⁴⁶ Further, there is a deathliness and philosophical dubiousness to an additional limitation that Ferguson imposes in the guise of robust principle: '*We should consider as plausible or probable only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered.*'⁴⁷ This is to fetishise – and

assume the retrievability of – the past's own partial knowledge; further, it closes down our relation to the past and actually falls prey to a form of the very anachronism it seeks to reject. A more philosophically robust understanding would self-consciously embrace counterfactuals as tools that return us to the very state of *unknowing*, *possibility*, *anxiety* and *hope* within which 'contemporaries' recognised they could not understand their chaotic world.

Although Lebow ultimately valorises the importance of plausibility, his emphasis is valuably on the mutually dependent nature of the categories of knowledge at stake: 'Every good counterfactual thus rests on multiple factials, just as every factual rests on counterfactual assumptions'.⁴⁸ It is Lebow who also enjoins us to 'worry less about the uncertainty of counterfactual experimentation and think more about its mind-opening implications'. In doing so, he underscores the value of 'miracle' counterfactuals – those which, unlike 'easily imagined variations', beggar historical belief or go well beyond the accepted limits of statistical contingency to reveal the theoretical/analytical 'utility of considering alternative worlds'.⁴⁹ In the same vein, Steven Weber urges us to use counterfactuals as 'idea generators'.⁵⁰ Tetlock and Belkin formulate the purpose of counterfactual experimentation in startlingly Blakean terms, underscoring its ability as a provocation that helps us 'mentally ... undo' that to which we are inured (the very canonicity, one might say, of 'history'), unpick the iron matrix of relations we have persuaded ourselves we have no agency to inflect, and unfossilise literary works.⁵¹

Towards (back to) a counterfactual Romanticism

As I note in Chapter 6 of this volume, from the early 1980s, Romantic New Historicism flirted with the counterfactual without admitting so and without recognising that liaison in quite those terms. New Historicism's eclectic invocation (or construction) of broad historical 'context' – in which a too-well-known text (paradigmatically a Romantic lyric) would suddenly appear revived, defamiliarised, evasive and itself uncannily counterfeit and counterfactual – actually displayed the core credentials of the counterfactual imagination. New Historicism's summoned 'context' revealed a parallel or multi-stor(e)y universe of 'alternatives'. These included the dialogic ontology of a text that is never merely 'itself' but which rather speaks to, speaks with, ventriloquises and is ventriloquised by countless other utterances; the troubling socio-political relations *not* treated in the manifest poem or subtly encoded in the text; and within

those relations, the multiple ghost-forms that the poem-as-received *might have* (and, as implied in the more aggressive modalities of New Historicism, *should have*) taken.

What is the result of Marjorie Levinson's 1986 revisionist reading of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' other than a counterfactual poem?⁵² Such was the resourcefulness with which deconstructionist historicism brought such multiverses (*multi-verses*) into view as a 'field' that relativised and ironised texts, and such was the freedom it exercised in resisting the delimitation of 'context', that one might appropriately speak of the New Historicist Imagination. As a method, New Historicism had a critical head and a creative heart, and should properly be viewed as one of the literary-critical heirs of the Romantic-period stocktaking of the 'porous boundaries' between history and fiction, data and discourse, information and narrative – boundaries at which the counterfactual imagination is always called into play.⁵³ Seeking a more affective, empathetic engagement with a 'history' they recognised as surviving only in ossified fragments, William Godwin (in 'Of History and Romance (1797)') and writer-historiographers such as Charlotte Smith, invested in what Greg Kucich calls 'feminized sympathetic historicism', recognised historical narratives as what Hayden White terms 'figurative characterizations of the events they purport to represent and explain'.⁵⁴ For Godwin and Smith, the very irretrievability of a lived past prompted the need for new affective strategies of engagement and animating dialogue with history that amounted to a new subjectivism. What such strategies opened up was a new context for historical inquiry: the past's own affective field.

A decade ago, at the end of the introduction to a collection of essays that reflected on the inheritance of Romantic New Historicism (which has shown no signs of being supplanted as a methodological orthodoxy in Romantic Studies in the intervening years), I called for a counterfactual turn that would represent not so much a break with New Historicism as an innovative development of it. If counterfactual speculation imagines history otherwise, why might it not imagine *literary* history – that related 'causal path' – otherwise also?⁵⁵ I remarked in that 2009 introduction that, to date, 'no sustained attempt' had been made 'to extend counterfactualism into the spheres of literary studies and literary history'.⁵⁶ I found this surprising, given the promise the counterfactual heuristic offers as a means of estranging literary history and individual texts, simultaneously relativising and confirming the significance of individual authors, involving us in the so-called 'Romantic Ideology' while at the same time