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Towards a counterfactual criticism: alternate history and the study of English Literature

Will Tattersdill  *

Department of English Literature, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

This essay asks what the study of alternate history can do for broader literary criticism, arguing that reflecting on historical contingency benefits our readings of canonical literature as well as it does our readings of twenty-first century popular fiction. I treat counterfacticity as a critical tool, useful at the level of both volume and sentence. My discussion begins with Elizabeth Gaskell's unfinished novel *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66), arguing that the opportunities raised by its openendedness can also be applied to completed novels like Wilkie Collins's *Armada* (1864–66), with which it shared pages in the *Cornhill*. Noting the role played by the periodical form in this discussion, I then turn to Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004), exploring the deliberate instabilities that novel confers on its alternate, magical nineteenth century. In a final, shorter section, I comment on the applications of counterfactual criticism in the classroom, pointing out that the discipline of English Literature has much to gain from a conscious effort to imagine the past having gone differently. The article counters outmoded assumptions regarding the value of popular fiction by arguing that such writings can provide us with new methodological awarenesses in everything that we read.

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I sometimes wonder what would have happened if you had been my real daughter, and Cynthia dear papa's, and Mr. Kirkpatrick and your own dear mother had all lived. People talk a good deal about natural affinities. It would have been a question for

- Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66) ch. LX¹

Towards the close of Gaskell's final novel, the redoubtable Mrs Gibson lapses, as we have all occasionally lapsed, into considering how her life might have

CONTACT Will Tattersdill  will.tattersdill@glasgow.ac.uk

*Present address: University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK.

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turned out differently. Even in this chapter, it is not her only counterfactual impulse. During a later conversation with her husband, she tells him how she regrets being born when she was ('I should so have liked to belong to this generation') and how she wishes he had chosen a different career ('I always think if you had gone to the bar you might have succeeded better').² These reflections add a tone of contingency to the book's close as well as a deep sense of reflection back over its earlier plot – an effect massively heightened by the glyph on the next page which marks Gaskell's unexpected death and the transfer of the novel's conclusion to her editor at the *Cornhill*, Frederick Greenwood. Greenwood's 'mainly conjectural' afterword begins by matching Mrs Gibson's counterfactual language: 'Had the writer lived, she would have sent her hero back to Africa forthwith ...'.³

Had she but lived. Mrs Gibson and Mr Greenwood are striking examples, one inside and one (almost) outside the text, of the assurance and persistency with which people reflect on *what would have happened*. Mrs Gaskell, though, who always writes Mrs Gibson with an affectionate irony, understood that it is easier to comment on such matters than it is to make sure of them. Mrs Gibson's counterfactuals are perhaps best read as part of the suite of hypotheses, projections, and schemes, often based on misapprehensions, through which she runs her household and in the midst of which she provides us with Gaskell's actual last published words ('let me go to sleep, and dream about my dear Cynthia and my new shawl!').⁴ Whilst we readers do not approve of Mrs Gibson's inability to be content with her lot, we are not, I think, meant to find her entirely unrelatable either. Certainly, it is difficult to glimpse the alternate possibilities raised by this final chapter without reflecting, Mrs-Gibson-like, upon them. What if Mrs Gibson and her stepdaughter were biologically related? What if Mr Gibson had become a lawyer? What if Gaskell had survived to finish the novel in which neither of these things happen? What sort of book would that be?

These questions are, of course, unanswerable, but that is not to say that we gain nothing by asking them. In part, that is because they are woven into the fabric of the novel's ending as it really is – woven into it precisely by the circumstances of Gaskell's death, which necessarily make the whole end read differently, that is, differently to how it would have read, could it have been written. They are circumstances which, placing the last words of the novel in Mrs Gibson's hands – would Gaskell have made this decision, had she lived? – push her ruminations about alternative pasts to centre stage. The novel's failure to end foregrounds its internal questioning of contingency. But it is a foregrounding only, for Mrs Gibson's mindset is by no means unprecedented in nineteenth-century fiction. Andrew H. Miller, writing after Stuart Hampshire, calls it the 'optative mood', brilliantly tracing it as a narrative technique across Victorian and Modern literature – his particular focus is on *Great Expectations*.⁵ But despite yielding for a

moment to the temptation of mentioning his own optative circumstances,⁶ Miller is largely focussed on counterfactuality as a function interior to texts, reserving fleeting discussion of the multiple endings of Pip and Estella, a famous exterior example, for his concluding paragraph.⁷

In this article, I want to argue for the potential of a counterfactual *criticism* – a criticism which attends to the forms and words which we do not have. This involves more than simply thinking about literature in terms of its absences – the letters lost, the novels left unfinished, the manuscripts burned – although that loss is certainly part of the picture. It also involves more than the industrial processes of what Mark Turner has called ‘compression’, which serve to make so much of what is written invisible to modern critical eyes.⁸ *Definite* absences such as these, provocative enough in themselves, can also be a way in to thinking about the *indefinite* absences which inhere in all literary production – roads not taken, words not chosen, plot points cast aside. Sometimes, these absences have a textual history. We know, for example, that Gaskell contemplated extending *Wives and Daughters* into a sequel, but had decided against it by the time of her death.⁹ We do not know, so far as I am aware, how many words she considered before choosing ‘philosopher’ for the end of the passage I began by quoting. We have only to try a few in its place, though – ‘theologian’, ‘parson’, ‘scientist’, ‘maiden aunt’ – to watch Mrs Gibson change, the novel itself change. What is the difference between this new, very slightly altered *Wives and Daughters* and the one we have? Asking this question allows us to see the work done by the text as it stands.

In short, there is value in heeding possibilities as well as absences. My suggestion is that space should exist within literary criticism for conjectural versions of works. ‘We all know the revolutions which happened’, the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said. ‘But how can we “explain” them unless we can compare them with the revolutions which have not happened [...]?’¹⁰ I propose that this formulation applies as well to texts as to revolutions.

In what follows, I work through some of the views of literature which are possible when we start thinking about – dare I even say imagining? – what is not there. At first glance, such an exercise may appear inimical to the classic view of criticism as the study of the ‘words on the page’.¹¹ In fact, it is precisely in practical criticism that counterfactual techniques have some of their most obvious benefits: the use of *this* word can teach us more about a text when we conceive of it as a choice, as being opposed to *that* one. Textual editing, too, despite the insistence on material evidence, gains something from a deliberately wielded counterfactual criticism. I say ‘deliberately’: it is not my presumption that I am coming up with anything new here, but rather that I am drawing attention to something which most of us already do, and which might benefit from being done on purpose. Whenever we say of any literary device that it ‘makes a difference’, we are imagining, however indistinctly, the alternate text from which the difference is made.

There is ground to be gained if we follow through on this thinking and talk about the alternate texts explicitly.

What does it mean to read Mrs Gibson's counterfactual mood, if not *as* alternate history, then *with* alternate history – *with* here meaning both 'using' and 'alongside'? Underlying this entire essay is the supposition that we can use previously denigrated popular genres – science fiction, fantasy, and so on – not only to expand literary criticism's sample size, increasing the number of texts of which we ask fundamentally similar questions, but also to develop tools, *changing* the questions we ask even of canonical texts. Gaskell doesn't read the same, not quite, after an extensive course of alternate history. This essay is my attempt to turn that fact to advantage.

From here, the discussion proceeds in three parts. I first attend to the periodical context of *Wives and Daughters*, arguing that the circumstances of its (interrupted) first publication highlight things about the serial format which invite readerly participation in counterfactual thinking. I then discuss the genre of alternate history, focussing on a work putatively written in a very different nineteenth century from Gaskell's, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004). In a concluding section, I reflect on the pedagogical implications of my argument, based on the experience of teaching an undergraduate alternate history module for three years. This essay therefore focusses in turn on material context, genre, and teaching, things which are bound together in alternate history and in the daily practice of literary critics more than we are sometimes inclined to acknowledge. Though my specific route between them doubtless represents a combination of interests peculiar to me, I hope the result is a discussion with far wider applicability.¹² My purpose here is not more than to provoke further thinking about counterfactuality as a reading practice.

I. Periodicals and provisionality

The ending of *Wives and Daughters* is unknowable. With only a short amount missing, of course, we flatter ourselves that we have a fairly good idea of what would have happened; the novel is, in Margaret Lane's words, 'in every important respect artistically complete'.¹³ For A. W. Ward, introducing the authoritative Knutsford edition, the work is 'all but finished'.¹⁴ The 'story would almost certainly have concluded in January 1866' had Gaskell lived, Angus Easson assures us (but note his *almost*); on these terms, not many more than two chapters are missing.¹⁵ It is easy to see why the broken-off narrative has prompted so much less speculation than, say, *Edwin Drood* (1870), an acknowledged mystery which Dickens died only halfway through writing.

Wives and Daughters had neither so sensational a plot nor so much of it missing as to precipitate the century and a half of intrigue inadvertently

launched by Dickens.¹⁶ Instead, the vast majority of Gaskell's readers seem to have taken it as a given that the missing ending would have seen Roger and Molly finally engaged. It is not my intention to dispute this assumption – one which, given the genre norms of Victorian literature, we can cheerfully regard as inevitable from the moment of their first meeting several hundred pages earlier. The question is not only what Gaskell would have done, though, but *how* she would have done it – if we consider ourselves interested in form as well as in plot, the scale of our loss becomes far more obvious. None knew this better than Gaskell's editor Frederick Greenwood: 'How charmingly that scene would have been drawn, had Mrs. Gaskell lived to depict it, we can only imagine: that it *would* have been charming – especially in what Molly did, and looked, and said – we know'.¹⁷

Greenwood speaks here not only with the personal authority of an editor but with a consumer confidence typical to the reader of the mid-Victorian periodical press. In their landmark study of nineteenth-century seriality, Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund point out that the promise of a satisfying ending, as well as its long deferral, is what yokes the novel-in-installments to the period's economic status quo:

The assumption of continuing growth and the confidence that an investment (whether of time or money) in the present would reap greater rewards in the future were shared features of middle-class capitalism and of serial reading.¹⁸

Our tendency to read Victorian novels outside their serial context, as well as our privilege in reading them, if not with foreknowledge of their conclusions, then at least foreknowledge of *whether* they conclude, profoundly separates us from the text's original readers. Many of these readers would have been investing time and money in Gaskell's text for eighteen months when the abbreviated final instalment came out – seen a certain way, this is actually a *graver* disappointment than *Edwin Drood*, whose readers had only six months' commitment to the novel when it abruptly ceased. 'All but finished', Ward's phrase, fails to do justice to the complexity of what it means when a temporally-embedded textual product which has been a regular part of life for a year and a half comes to an end so suddenly, even and perhaps especially when it was on the verge of a natural conclusion.

Keeping sight of seriality allows us to recapture something from the original readers' experience of *Wives and Daughters*, an experience which depended upon speculating about how future instalments might develop – and how past ones might otherwise have developed. The first step in this argument is provided by Margaret Beetham, who writes of the periodical as 'the form which refuses the closed ending and allows for the possibility of alternative meanings'.¹⁹ While all serials and magazines eventually end, the *idea* of the magazine is rhetorically infinite – an inducement to temporally-oriented speculation. Beetham is clear that this is only half the

picture – the periodical, as a tool of the status quo, is ‘both open-ended and end-stopped’ – but she affirms that ‘the essential quality of the periodical, its serial form and the other ways in which it seems to resist closure, can be read as a sign of its strength as a potentially creative form for its readers’.²⁰

The most obvious feature bestowed upon fiction by serialisation is, as Hughes and Lund note, ‘suspense and anticipation’ – but this quality, they go on to say, is bound up with a number of far more complex reactions to literature, frequently overlooked. One of them is that ‘[r]eaders and reviewers engaged in provisional assumptions and interpretations about the literary world [in the gaps between instalments], which then shaped the evolving understanding of works as they continued to unfold part by part’.²¹ In other words, a continuous and temporally-oriented re-evaluation of a developing story was an intrinsic part of reading the Victorian novel when it first appeared.²² None of these critics explicitly discuss counterfactual speculation, but their emphases on provisionality and openness to readerly interpretation, as well as the intrinsically temporal nature of the periodical form, mean that the step can be taken without imposing upon their other arguments. Periodical suspense is the idea that a gap between instalments encourages speculation about possible futures for the text: to this, Greenwood’s comment that some things about the unwritten ending (Gaskell’s writing) are hazier than others (its quality) passively attests. Adding that periodicals can encourage similar speculation about possible *pasts* is no huge departure, if only because the fixed, immovable past of one instalment was, a few months earlier, a tenuous possible future of another. With weeks to wait between each part, readers are induced towards this kind of speculation both by the form of the text and, not infrequently, its content.

A lateral example might help to clarify this point. In the same *Cornhill* as the final instalment of *Wives and Daughters*, we find three chapters of Wilkie Collins’s *Armada* (1864–66), a novel more or less entirely dissimilar to Gaskell’s in tone, scale, and sense of propriety, yet one which had shared every one of its serial appearances with *Wives and Daughters*.²³ The juxtaposition of these two novels in the same print space – and the surprising correspondences between them – can, as Deborah Wynne has written, teach us much about how the 1860s periodical press entangled the locutions of class, propriety, and literary worth which attended the rise of the sensation novel.²⁴ But besides their common material context and, consequently, their at least partly common readership, these novels share another trait: Collins routinely gives us characters who, like Mrs Gibson, are inclined to think over the past and imagine it altered.

Armada can reasonably be described as a meditation on inevitability. Wynne does a good job of summarising how its temporalities are bound together with its plenitude of written forms when she describes it as ‘based on timeshifts, flashbacks, dreams, letters, and diaries’.²⁵ These constant

movements in space and time, which contrast with the relatively stable flow and voice of *Wives and Daughters*, bounce the reader between geographies, textual media – and possibilities. One character, Midwinter, obsessively oscillates over the question of whether destiny is inescapable, whether dreams can predict the future. The novel deliberately refuses to settle on an answer to this dilemma, even as it sends readers backwards into previous instalments and forwards into the possibilities of the serial future.²⁶

It's not surprising, then, to find that *Armada* also offers us plenty of individual optative moments. In the particular issue where *Wives and Daughters* ends, one such moment stands out: it is chapter thirteen of book four, and Bashwood, a relatively peripheral character, is about to have a realisation that will shape the entire last act of the plot. The scene begins with him in a state of despair, but he is prompted to his key realisation by an innocent question from his landlady: 'If your good lady had only been alive now, sir, what a comfort you would have found her, wouldn't you?'²⁷ This reference to Bashwood's wife, who was anything but a comfort to him whilst living, sets in motion a train of thought in the character – and in the reader of the serial, who will have to think back to the May 1865 issue, eight months earlier, to recall the entire sad story.²⁸ Bashwood's wife being 'alive now' would certainly alter the plot drastically, since at this point it is being driven, unbeknownst to the landlady, by his attraction to somebody else. But this optative question also has a profound ripple-effect on the novel as it actually exists. If the landlady's counterfactual reckoning were absent – and here begins our own chain of speculation – the plot would stall. There would be no discussion of the estranged son, no remembering of his profession, no letter to London, no reunion between Bashwood and Gwilt, nobody to intercept Allan and Midwinter at the train station ... the details of Collins's byzantine narrative are less important than the point that counterfactual thinking plays a fundamental role in how they are advanced, how they are expressed, and how the periodical reader interacts with them. The landlady's optative question is itself the tiny moment that makes the difference, the crushed butterfly which sets in motion the remaining chain of events.²⁹

Other examples are possible even from the January 1866 *Cornhill*, but hopefully I have made the point that the periodical form, at least when carrying serialised fiction, encourages speculation about the past *as it might otherwise be*. Its characters and writers respond to such thinking, and its readers, attenuated to the code-switching demanded by the gaps and transitions between issues, and between different kinds of material in the *same* issue, do as well. Echoes of this aspect of periodicity still survive in our book versions – especially in the case of *Wives and Daughters*, which Gaskell never had a chance to revise and which cannot be reprinted without the coda from a magazine editor.³⁰ On the whole, though, we

tend to read and discuss Victorian literature without attending either to the context of their periodical publication or the optative thinking which such publication can encourage. If counterfactual thinking is laid up in the fabric of Victorian fiction as it originally appeared, though, is it not neglectful for critics to avoid it?

It is not my position that criticism would be immeasurably improved by scholar after scholar producing hundreds of new endings of *Wives and Daughters*. But what if it was? (This is not the last time you will see me try that rhetorical trick). A scene where Roger proposed to Molly outside – amongst nature; recalling their first meeting; the sphere of his scientific expertise – would certainly create a different mood to one with, say, a proposal in Molly's house – her realm, but also that of Mrs Gibson. Roger's phrasing at the moment of proposal might recall, or refuse to recall, his earlier attachment to Cynthia, and that might change our readings of the (surviving) scene in the last instalment where he discusses the subject with Mr Gibson. There are numerous other tiny ways in which the precise management of the crucial scene could alter the entire book. Inventing versions of our own cannot lead us to a 'correct' answer, the final text as Gaskell would have written it – but it *can* draw attention to what is at stake in an ending, refine our understanding of the pressure points of the rest of the novel, and lead us to new conclusions about the openness of the text as it actually exists. And if this process is illuminating for a text without an ending, why shouldn't it be so for a text which *does* conclude? I understand the value of the counterfactual text, the imagined alternative, in terms of the light that it sheds on the text as we have it.

II. Alternative facts

A doubtful reader might reasonably be wondering, at this point, where the actual genre of alternate history figures in this discussion. Though my emphasis here is less on the genre specifically than it is on turning its questions outward to the rest of the literary canon, it perhaps behoves my argument to bring in a text which is explicitly counterfactual. *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, a novel set between 1806 and 1817, is a useful example, placing many of the expected trappings of that period – society drama, long carriage rides, the battle of Waterloo, Lord Byron – alongside its fabulously economical descriptions of fairies, enchantments, and the restoration of English magic.

Although the genre has ballooned since the 1990s, in the wake of texts like Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992), Kingsley Amis's *The Alteration* (1976), and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), alternate history as a form of fiction is generally acknowledged as having nineteenth-century roots. Louis Geoffroy's *Napoléon et la Conquête du Monde, 1812–*

1832 (*Napoleon and the Conquest of the World*; 1836), for example, is often identified as the progenitor – one of Clarke’s wryest accomplishments in *Strange and Norrell* is to present an alternate history in which the British win the Battle of Waterloo.³¹ Geoffroy’s depiction of a Napoleonic victory, with consequent global benefits in peace, science, and the arts, was written at roughly the time *Wives and Daughters* is set – a small but crucial element of Gaskell’s plot turns around Squire Hamley’s Waterloo-era distrust of the French, not shared by the younger generation. Conveniently, then, the period over which Gaskell looks back when writing her 1860s novel in an 1830s setting is a period which, alongside much else, includes the onset of the alternate history novel.

I am not suggesting a line of influence between Geoffroy and Gaskell here. Geoffroy was not translated into English until the twentieth century, and it is important to stress that my argument has no reliance on ‘claiming’ Gaskell as an author of alternate history. The evocation of the 1830s, however, reminds us that Gaskell *was* writing historical fiction – a slightly older genre whose boundaries with alternate history are often fuzzy – and that the depiction of Molly Gibson’s community is one shaped profoundly by Gaskell’s hindsight.³² When Mrs. Gibson says (optatively) that she ‘should so have liked to belong to this generation’, the generation in question is both young Molly’s and the declining author’s.³³ Gaskell stops short of altering established historical facts, but her portrait of backwards-glancing Mrs. Gibson is itself part of a meticulously detailed backward glance. The same is true of *Strange and Norrell*, which, despite being written far later and set slightly earlier, nevertheless relies not only on a curated, historical distance but on the rhetorically-assumed near-distance of personal recollection.

With its Romantic setting and intricate understanding of social comedy, Clarke’s writing is frequently compared in reviews to that of Jane Austen.³⁴ Such comparisons certainly have weight, but they miss the fact that Clarke’s unnamed narrating persona – despite writing *about* Austen’s period – is implicitly situated at a later historical moment. At one point, the narrator says that they are supplying a brief description of the places where street magicians do business ‘[i]n case there are any readers who do not remember the magicians’ booths of our childhood’, implying a writer (and reader) for whom the events of the novel are (just) within living memory.³⁵ In the very last footnote in the text, a switch to the present tense implies that John Childermass, a character who is of middle age when the text ends, is still living at the moment of supposed composition.³⁶ Such hints, few and far between, are easy to miss in a text of over a thousand pages which remains deliberately coy about what happens after its action ceases. For all that, the device of narratorial near-distance is one deployed by a large quantity of Victorian historical fiction – including *Wives and Daughters*.

If *Strange and Norrell* is, as I suggest, positioned as a mid-Victorian text, 'written' at the very dawn of alternate history and set at a period predating that dawn, then what does its status as an alternate history in our own era allow us to say about counterfactuality in literature more broadly?³⁷ In the first place, we must note that Clarke's characters indulge hardly at all in the optative mood which so captivates Mrs. Gibson and which Miller finds so pervasive in the work of Dickens and others. Mr Norrell regrets his time in London – 'what seemed remarkable to him now were the long years [...] away from his library, at the beck and call of the Ministers' – but his regret doesn't take the form of specific conjecture about how very differently things would have gone had he stayed in Yorkshire (his move to London precipitates virtually the entire plot of the book).³⁸ In the novel's final scene, depicting the brief reunion between Strange and his wife, an alternate ending is placed not in the mouths of the characters but, deftly, in the back of the reader's imagination: '...in that moment all was as it used to be – it was as if they had never parted; but she did not offer to go into the Darkness with him and he did not ask her'.³⁹ There are actually three counterfactuals here, so gentle as barely to be visible: as if they had never parted; as if she offered to go into the Darkness; and as if he asked her. Between them, these counterfactuals powerfully show what is possible and not possible in the relationship between Jonathan and Arabella. But there is no articulation of the relationship they might have had, even though Jonathan in particular has plenty of cause to wonder about it.

What would *Strange and Norrell* be like if it had more optative moments for its characters? It seems to me that the novel so imagined would inevitably lay less emphasis on the other kind of historical contingency that Clarke deploys, the contingency created by scholarly debate. The text's famous footnotes are easy to read as a simple means of conveying background information about Clarke's world – in truth, though, they serve a much more complex function, often destabilising precisely the kind of narrative trust which footnotes or endnotes normally, in a work of fantasy, presume upon. Take, for example, the story of the Master of Nottingham's daughter (ch.25 fn.4), a twelfth-century folk tale which runs in a footnote over six pages beneath a main plot to which it is apparently entirely incidental. The note arises because Mr Norrell, in his position as Strange's teacher, is launching into a speech about magical history – but he breaks off because of renewed awkwardness between the two, who are quarrelling and will eventually part ways. As is often the way in this novel, the footnote picks up the story Mr Norrell cannot tell. After more than 2,000 words describing a struggle for a magic ring between the Master of Nottingham's daughter and the wicked Jocelyn Trent, Clarke's narrator appears to grow dissatisfied ('The rest of the story has all the usual devices') and ends by sketching an alternate tale:

There is another version of this story which contains no magic ring, no eternally-burning wood, no phoenix – no miracles at all, in fact. According to this version Margaret Ford and the Master of Nottingham's daughter (whose name was Donata Torel) were not enemies at all, but the leaders of a fellowship of female magicians that flourished in Nottinghamshire in the twelfth century. [...] This less colourful version of the story has never been as popular as the other but it is this version which Jonathan Strange said was the true one and which he included in *The History and Practice of English Magic*.⁴⁰

This note is part of the apparatus through which the novel makes its point that, as Daniel Baker has put it, 'history can be written and re-written, marginalised or idealised, becoming a political tool and/or a portal to socio-political investigation'.⁴¹ It is not only that two contradictory versions of a history are offered, nor even that they are positioned so that the second, a scholarly work with the proper names of historical actors, deflates the first, a folk tale with 'all the usual devices': the whole is offered as a footnote, both versions implicitly sidelined from the main text by the incipient quarrel between Strange and Norrell. Implicitly, but far from explicitly: the story takes up all but four lines each of pages 305–308, visually dominating the space taken up by the eponymous magicians and utterly impossible for the reader to ignore. Which history is important to the elusive frame narrator on these pages: the conversation between Strange and Norrell (main text, but almost absent), the twelfth-century fable of the Master of Nottingham's Daughter (an all-consuming footnote), or Strange's revised version of the twelfth-century past (the footnote's afterthought)?

Clarke's novel is animated by the tensions between academic history, folk tale, myth, and personal remembrance – it is these alternative ways of finding the past that the novel spreads out in place of the optative thoughts of its characters. If you know the novel, consider the different views of English history represented in the wider text by Strange, Norrell, and the gentleman with the thistle-down hair. Clarke is also intensely interested in the limitations of these mechanisms: consider the events surrounding Stephen Black's true name, erased from history by the forces of British imperialism and recoverable only with dark and equally acquisitive acts of magic. Consider, too, the different attitudes taken in the text towards its plethora of (invented) history books: Norrell hoards them devotedly but is unable to write one of his own; Strange writes texts as fluently as he improvises magic in their absence.⁴² If no one character in *Strange and Norrell* has a particularly optative mood, it is because the text as a whole functions to meditate upon the different valencies of hindsight and historical imagination which they collectively embody.

Capitalising upon its simultaneous position as nineteenth-century history and twenty-first century alternate history, *Strange and Norrell* calls its readers to reflect on the forms through which we come to understand the

past. The novel is just as dependant on the reader's forward and backward theorising as the serials I discussed in the previous section. Produced in the very different print culture of the 2000s, it was, of course, never itself serialised (except on television, an alternate form of the story which I lack space to explore here). Nevertheless, it is suffused with periodical culture, unsurprisingly given Clarke's deep knowledge of the historical period. Strange's break with Norrell, for instance, is precipitated by an article he writes for the *Edinburgh Review*, which is reproduced entirely in the text as chapter 38.⁴³ After their break, Strange laments that his future conversations with Norrell must be conducted at periodical intervals.⁴⁴ Much of the revival of English magic in the rest of the novel is conducted by setting up and disbanding specialist journals, and it is through word in the periodical press that news of Norrell's achievements is first broadcast to society. But periodicals are more than plot equipment in *Strange and Norrell*: the incitement for the reader to speculate about episodes past – and episodes to come – remains. The reference to *The History and Practice of English Magic* in the above-quoted passage about the Master of Nottingham's Daughter is proleptic: Strange will not, at this point in the novel, write the book for another seven years. In this footnote, then, as in many others throughout the book, the reader is engaged not only in wondering which version of the twelfth-century past is accurate but in speculating about what can be inferred about the novel's future from the small detail Clarke gives them. Crucially, this is a gesture that separates the novel's actual readers from its implied (ie. in-world) readers: the people addressed by the narrator already know what will happen to Strange's book, but the people addressed by Susanna Clarke have no idea. Like the reader of *Armada*, they are prompted to parse and re-parse the possible events of both past and future which the story continues both to raise and to frustrate.

III. The counterfactual classroom

In the assessment of Karen Hellekson, alternate history 'speculates about such topics as the nature of time and linearity, the past's link to the present, the present's link to the future, and the role of individuals in the history-making process'.⁴⁵ I suggest that though it may also do other things, the same is true of a responsibly-conducted literary criticism.

When I started teaching alternate history to undergraduates – that is, running a module about the ways in which the genre intersects with broader questions of time, memory, and agency interesting to all literary criticism – I found myself beginning to treat counterfactuality as a classroom tool, not merely as a subject. Clarke mentions King Arthur's Merlin only in the most fleeting way, for example: what if she'd made more of him? Students can generally get a considerable discussion out of this question,

perhaps because it engages our creative faculties without requiring us to pin our colours to any definite knowledge. In the case of my alternate history module, I found the discussion was better the more specifically they articulated what the ‘Merlin-Plus’ *Strange and Norrell* (say) would actually look like. It could hardly be better or clearer than the original (or, we might say, the *eventual*) text, but perhaps the original became better and clearer for being seen from the newly-constructed vantage point.

Before long, I was encouraging students to use counterfactual strategies at the level of close reading. What difference does it make that Clarke uses so much italic at the decisive moment when the trees talk to Stephen Black (pp. 981–2)? Imagine the passage without the italic and the question becomes both more interesting and easier to answer. The technique swiftly proved useful in other classes, classes in which alternate history was never the subject of discussion. After emerging in the classroom, it has now become a fairly standard piece of my research toolkit regardless of what I’m writing about. Perhaps ironically, substituting a comma for an ellipsis or an adjective for its near-synonym actually concretises any discussion about the function or effect of the original formulation. What has most impressed me about counterfactuality in the classroom, since I started doing it deliberately, is how quickly students catch on: most need comfortably less than twenty seconds’ explanation before beginning to use it carefully and confidently.

In the main, this is because students are resourceful and imaginative – it might also be the case that, as I said above, counterfactual criticism is latent in other methodological approaches in ways that makes its manifest adoption easier to countenance. It’s also the case, though, that there is an ever-wider popular-cultural familiarity with the basic idea of alternate history. Many long-running TV shows – and not just science fiction – include an alternate history episode of some kind (the best is *Community*’s ‘Remedial Chaos Theory’, 2011).⁴⁶ Alternate history underpins the cult romantic comedy *Sliding Doors* (1998), which follows the lives of two different Gwyneth Paltrows – the one who caught a particular train, and the one who didn’t. It also provides the heuristic for acknowledged works of literary fiction such as Kate Atkinson’s deservedly Costa-winning *Life After Life* (2013). There is a conversation to be had about the renewed popularity of choose-your-own-adventure gamebooks, to say nothing of video games. Far from being, as it is sometimes visualised, an enclave within military science fiction, alternate history is all around us – and that is before considering the optative mood of nonfictional public discourse. What if Hillary Clinton had won the 2016 election? What if the UK had locked down a week earlier into the coronavirus pandemic? These are not just questions for writers of science fiction, but for writers in mainstream journalistic outlets.⁴⁷ For Megan Garber, and many others, the reality of life after Trump and during the pandemic is itself an

alternate history; the real world has become counterfactual.⁴⁸ The title of my previous section (and undergraduate module), ‘Alternative Facts’, is not taken from a counterfactual text but from US Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway’s notorious suggestion that the number of attendees at Trump’s inauguration was a matter of opinion.⁴⁹

I have not the space to more than hint this here, but the ubiquity of alternate history in our present timeline offers political as well as pedagogical opportunities to a discipline which is increasingly struggling to capture the attention of young people.⁵⁰ Priyamvada Gopal’s clarion call to decolonise the university is built around a counterfactual question, arguably *the* counterfactual question: ‘what cultural and social potential might have come to fruition had the European empires not so decisively and brutally changed the shape of the world into what it is today?’⁵¹ For Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, too, decoupling history from its colonial past requires acts of ‘unlearning’: ‘Unlearning means not engaging with those relegated to the ‘past’ as ‘primary sources’ but rather as potential companions’.⁵² These arguments, and the methodological realignments they invite us to make, converge on mine from very different starting points. I mention them in closing not to claim direct equivalence, but to observe that ‘alternateness’ is an emergent force in academia just as much as in popular culture. Feeding it explicitly into a literary-critical methodology makes criticism responsive to the world, makes critics responsible for their imaginations, binds the genres to critical practice, and potentially invites whole new demographics into the discipline of English Literature.

IV. Envoi

Accomplished literature is all very well in its way, no doubt, but much more fascinating to the contemplative man are the books that have not been written.

- H. G. Wells, ‘The Man of the Year Million’ (1893)⁵³

Admit even to all the most outdated objections to studying popular fiction. Say that a work is simplistic, or crudely drawn, or crowd-pleasing. Say that it is trivialising or trivial. Say that it is impossible for the critic to use for a sober illumination of art, society, or the human condition. Say that it is bad writing. Say all these things, and then say: what if it wasn’t? Alternate history teaches us that when this question is asked and answered in good faith, new ways emerge of seeing both the work and the world.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘Wives and Daughters’, *Cornhill*, 13.73 (January 1866), p. 3.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

3. A. W. Ward, Introduction to Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters: An Every-Day Story* (London: Smith, Elder, 1906), p. xi; Gaskell, 'Wives and Daughters', p. 12.
4. Ibid., p. 11.
5. Andrew H. Miller, "'A Case of Metaphysics': Counterfactuals, Realism, *Great Expectations*", *ELH*, 79.3 (Fall 2012), pp. 773–96.
6. Ibid., p. 774.
7. Ibid., p. 792.
8. Mark Turner, 'Seriality, Miscellaneity, and Compression in Nineteenth-Century Print', *Victorian Studies*, 62.2 (Winter 2020), pp. 283–94.
9. Ward, Introduction, p. xiv. Note Ward's counterfactual tone here: 'Had Mrs. Gaskell actually reconciled herself to the adoption of the device [...] Roger must, of course, have become still more of a protagonist in the action of Part II than he is in that of the story as it stands'.
10. H. R. Trevor-Roper, *History and Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 13.
11. F. R. Leavis, 'How to Teach Reading', in *Education and the University* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943), p. 120.
12. For example, I am grateful to the *Textual Practice* reader who pointed out the essentially counterfactual approaches taken by David Ricardo in his *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817). I lack the expertise (and space) to take on the question of whether these nonfictional transactions in alternateness could provide us with new ways of understanding the evolution of the novel – that the question is worth addressing, though, cannot be doubted.
13. Margaret Lane, Introduction to Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (London: Dent, 1966), p. 7.
14. Ward, 'Introduction', p. xv.
15. Angus Easson, Introduction to Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. ix. Three is the normal number of chapters in a single periodical instalment of *Wives and Daughters*, and only one (or a long part of one) appears in the final, January 1866 number. If Easson is right that the novel was not extending into February, and if the *Cornhill* wasn't planning to give Gaskell more space for a longer conclusion, then two missing chapters is a reasonable guess.
16. For a full overview of *Drood* and the generations of speculation it encouraged, see Pete Orford, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood: Charles Dickens' Unfinished Novel and Our Endless Attempts to End It* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2018).
17. Gaskell, 'Wives and Daughters', p. 12.
18. Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), p. 4.
19. Margaret Beetham, 'Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre', in Laurel Brake, Aled Jones, and Lionel Madden (eds.), *Investigating Victorian Journalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 27.
20. Ibid., p. 29; p. 27.
21. Hughes and Lund, *The Victorian Serial*, p. 8.
22. For another account of reader-side extrapolation from fragments of serial fiction, see Gowan Dawson, 'Literary Megatheriums and Loose Baggy Monsters: Paleontology and the Victorian Novel', *Victorian Studies* 53.2 (Winter 2011), pp. 203–30.

23. *Armadale* began serialisation in November 1864, when *Wives and Daughters* was on its fourth instalment. After January 1866, it ran for another five months.
24. Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Magazine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 31–34.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
26. In an appendix added for the book version, Collins tells readers that ‘they are free to interpret it by the natural or the supernatural theory, as the bent of their own minds may incline them’. Wilkie Collins, *Armadale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 662.
27. Wilkie Collins, ‘*Armadale*’, *Cornhill*, 13.73 (January 1866), p. 104.
28. Wilkie Collins, ‘*Armadale*’, *Cornhill*, 11.65 (May 1865), p. 535.
29. The image of a giant historical change precipitated by the killing of a prehistoric insect came to prominence in Ray Bradbury’s short story ‘A Sound of Thunder’ (June 25 1952 *Collier’s*).
30. ‘Had Elizabeth Gaskell lived only a little longer, [*Wives and Daughters*] would have been actually completed and in reprinting it, no doubt she would have caught up and harmonised a number of slips and inconsistencies, curious in themselves, though in no way detrimental to the novel’s total effect.’ Easson, ‘Introduction’, p. xiii.
31. For a sketch of the genre at this time, including detailed discussion of Geoffroy, see Catherine Gallagher, *Telling it Like it Wasn’t: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), pp. 49–66. For Geoffroy’s influence on later science fiction, see Adam Roberts, ‘Napoleon as Dynamite: Geoffroy’s *Napoléon Apocryphe* and Science Fiction as Alternate History’ in Glyn Morgan and C. Palmer-Patel (eds.), *Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 31–45.
32. For an account of the nineteenth-century historical novel see Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 33–38.
33. Gaskell, ‘*Wives and Daughters*’, p. 10.
34. See, for example, Laura Miller, ‘When Harry Potter met Jane Austen’, *Salon* (4 September 2004). https://www.salon.com/2004/09/04/clarke_13/ [Date accessed: 15 July 2022].
35. Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 227.
36. ‘There are very few modern magicians who do not declare themselves to be either Strangite or Norrellite, the only notable exception being John Childermass himself. Whenever he is asked he claims to be in some degree both’. Clarke, *Strange and Norrell*, p. 1000 fn. 5.
37. The assumption that the world of *Strange and Norrell* does proceed to a Queen Victoria (or a genre of alternate history), is of course impossible to substantiate. I look to the fact that royal succession in England seems to be uninterrupted in Clarke’s England – there is a George III and a Prince Regent, and many other real-life political figures, their dates unchanged, appear in the text. This is Ryan’s “principle of minimal departure” in action: Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Fiction, Non-Factuals, and the Principle of Minimal Departure’, *Poetics* 9 (1980), pp. 403–22. Clarke gives us no clue about how the far-reaching events of the novel’s close might create further divergences from the actual chronology of the nineteenth century. But what if she did?

38. Clarke, *Strange and Norrell*, p. 991.
39. Clarke, *Strange and Norrell*, p. 1006.
40. Clarke, *Strange and Norrell*, p. 309 fn. 4.
41. Daniel Baker, 'History as Fantasy: Estranging the Past in Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell', *Otherness*, 2, no. 1 (August 2011), p. 2.
42. On the ways *Strange and Norrell* uses books, see Dierdre Byrne, 'The Book and the Spell in Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*', *English Academy Review*, 26, no. 2 (2009), pp. 4–15.
43. Clarke exaggerates the real *Edinburgh Review*'s orthographic devices, such as the capitalisation of proper names, perhaps to draw attention to the change in media. The article itself is presented as the thirteenth in the January 1815 *Edinburgh Review*. There was no such issue in actual history – the *Review* was published three or four times a year in this period – but the issue which would have been out in January 1815 was dated November 1814 (the month *Strange* writes his piece in the novel) and contains twelve articles. One of them is a review of the prodigiously influential historical novel *Waverley*.
44. 'Since last night I have thought of fifty things I ought to have said to him. Now I suppose I shall have to put them in an article or a review – which will not be published until April at the earliest – and then he will have to instruct Lascelles or Portishead to write a repudiation – which will not appear until June or July. Five or six months to know what he would say to me!' Clarke, *Strange and Norrell*, p. 544.
45. Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001), p. 4.
46. For more on TV alternate history, including (briefly, on pp. 172–73) *Community*, see Karen Hellekson, 'Agency and Contingency in Televisual Alternate History Texts', in Glyn Morgan and C. Palmer-Patel (eds.), *Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 170–185.
47. Nate Silver, 'If Hillary Clinton Had Won', *FiveThirtyEight* (20 July 2016). <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/if-clinton-had-won/> [Date accessed: 15 July 2022]; Heather Stewart and Ian Sample, 'Coronavirus: Enforcing UK Lockdown One Week Earlier 'Could have Saved 20,000 Lives'', *The Guardian* (11 June 2020). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/10/uk-coronavirus-lockdown-20000-lives-boris-johnson-neil-ferguson> [Date accessed: 15 July 2022].
48. Megan Garber, 'Americans are Living in an Alternate History', *The Atlantic* (6 July 2020). <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/07/alternate-history-pop-culture-pandemic/613783/> [Date accessed: 15 July 2022].
49. Aaron Blake, 'Kellyanne Conway Says Donald Trump's Team Has 'Alternative Facts'. Which Pretty Much Says It All', *Washington Post* (22 January 2017). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/22/kellyanne-conway-says-donald-trumps-team-has-alternate-facts-which-pretty-much-says-it-all/> [Date accessed: 15 July 2022].
50. Anna Fazackerley, 'Novelists Issue Plea to Save English Degrees as Demand Slumps', *The Guardian* (19 June 2021). <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jun/19/novelists-issue-plea-to-save-english-degrees-as-demand-slumps> [Date accessed: 15 July 2022].
51. Priyamvada Gopal, 'On Decolonisation and the University', *Textual Practice*, 35, no. 6 (2021), p. 890.

52. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 16.
53. H. G. Wells, 'The Man of the Year Million: A Scientific Forecast', *Pall Mall Gazette* 57, no. 8931 (6 November 1893), p. 3.

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ORCID

Will Tattersdill  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7100-3132>