DOCUMENT

UFD032 Ben Carver

An Entangled Forest: Evolution and Speculative Fiction

Drawing on his book Alternate Histories and Nineteenth-Century Literature, Ben Carver examines the figures and functions of evolution, isolation, and entanglement in the imaginary Utopias and Uchronias of speculative fiction, and plots some unsuspected paths between early counterfactual histories and the dark underworlds of contemporary conspiracy theory

Entanglements

> *December 17th, 1832.* — Having now finished with Patagonia and the Falkland Islands, I will describe our first arrival in Tierra del Fuego. A little after noon we doubled Cape St. Diego, and entered the famous Strait of Le Maire. We kept close to the Fuegian shore, but the outline of the rugged, inhospitable Staten-land was visible amidst the clouds. In the afternoon we anchored in the Bay of Good Success. While entering we were saluted in a manner becoming the inhabitants of this savage land. *A group of Fuegians partly concealed by the entangled forest*, were perched on a wild point overhanging the sea; and as we passed by, they sprang up and waving their tattered cloaks sent forth a loud and sonorous shout.[1]

Entanglement is a figure that occurred to Darwin on his encounter with the Fuegian islanders in 1832 when travelling on the HMS Beagle as a gentleman scientist on her surveying expedition of South America. He repeats the term later in the same diary entry, describing a Fuegian's 'black, coarse, and entangled hair', and later again: 'On every side were lying irregular masses of rock and torn-up trees; other trees, though still erect, were decayed to the heart and ready to fall. The entangled mass of the thriving and the fallen reminded me of the forests within the tropics—yet there was a difference: for in these still solitudes, Death, instead of Life, seemed the predominant spirit.' The repetition of the word attracts our attention, applied as it is to a native islander's hair, the cluttered mass of flora in this desolate landscape, and in the quotation I started with, as the Fuegians emerge from the obscurity of the trees, humans and forest seem to be entangled with each other. This description, at the origin point of modern evolutionary theory, seems wonderfully suggestive, for Darwin's and Wallace's theory of evolution will cast the human species back among the plants and animals that Christian origin myths made it so distinct from (this is one of Donna Haraway's four decentrings of man).[2] But at the same time as 'entangling' humans in the natural world, the explanation

1. C. Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle: Charles Darwin's Journal of Researches* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1989). Emphasis added.

2. D.J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 12.

of speciation is a narrative of *dis*entanglement, and Darwinism's application to societies and race provided (spurious) rationale for conceiving of miscegenation and degeneration as 'bad mixtures.'

At the same time as 'entangling' humans in the natural world, the explanation of speciation is a narrative of disentanglement

It seems to me that there is something organic and developmental about much speculative fiction. Matthew Beaumont refers to the fact that 'The finest utopian and science fiction intimates that an inchoate future is secretly gestating in the present'.[3] The science fiction reference here is to Ridley Scott's *Alien*, and the parasitic life-cycle of the monster, birth exploding dramatically out of a human chest. And utopian thought and literature has also been theorized as something nested within the existing world: there is Fredric Jameson's idea of the 'utopian space' as 'an imaginary enclave within real social space', and Ernst Bloch's formulation of the utopian as 'the still undischarged future in the past'.[4] Bloch's way of thinking about utopian potential as that which can be recovered from the past, peeled away from history, is one I've applied to the format of the alternate history, where one imagines an outcome that history might have produced, for example a version of European history where the power of the Christian church was restricted to spiritual, not secular affairs; and this imaginary history is an argument for achieving such a disentanglement of church and state in the author's present day.[5] And conspiracy culture too, displays the aesthetic form of entanglement: conspiracy theories describe the tentacle-like reach of secret societies, the penetration of authority by sinister forces, and the networks of global capitalism. Conspiracy is a pattern of interpretation of the world, and an aesthetic figure that narrative presentations of conspiracies rely upon: Entangled Plot coordinates entangled Plot.

3. M. Beaumont, *The Spectre of Utopia: Utopian and Science Fictions at the Fin de Siècle* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 221–22.

4. F. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007); E. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995, 3 vols.), vol. 1, 200.

5. B. Carver, *Alternate Histories and Nineteenth-Century Literature: Untimely Meditations in Britain, France, and America* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

Replaying Life's Tape

Stephen J. Gould has been one of the most widely read popularizers of science in the anglosphere, his own background being palaeontology, evolutionary biology and its history. He began a lifelong commitment to opposing the application of pseudoscientific ideas about evolutionary *progress* as an undergraduate (he mounted a campaign against establishments in Leeds, where he studied, that excluded customers on the basis of race), and his work insistently opposes the 'discovery' of design, intention, and hierarchy in natural history. In the concluding chapter of *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (1989), he summarizes his position thus: 'Homo sapiens is an entity, not a tendency'.[6] To put it differently, Gould refuses to recognize *pattern* in evolutionary history, instead seeking to explain *process* without reference to tendency or intention; this is laid out in the book's opening chapter, when he takes issue with the presentation of mankind's development as a stately march, upwards and onwards. Of course the recognition of patterns of purpose and direction in human evolutionary history is the origin-point of eugenics, and the overdevelopment of pattern-recognition, or *apophenia*, is a pretty good identifier of paranoid, conspiracist thinking.

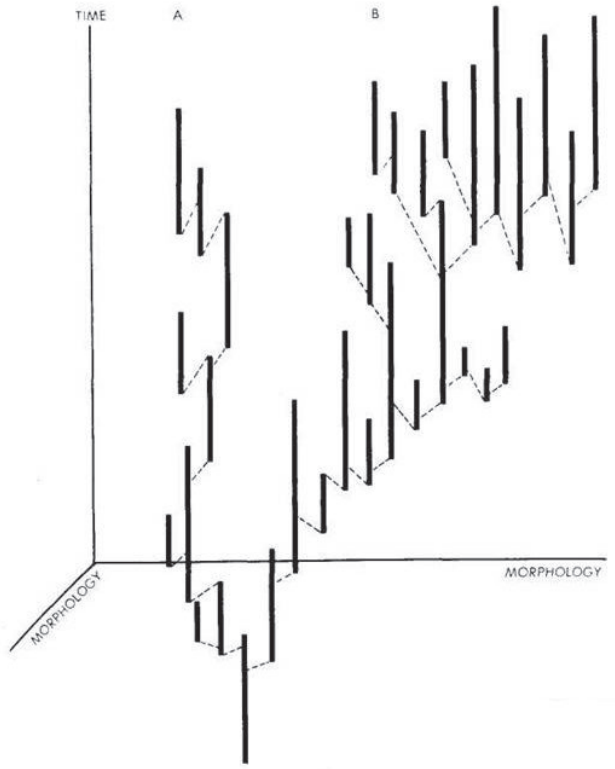
Conspiracy theories describe the tentacle-like reach of secret societies, the penetration of authority by sinister forces, and the networks of global capitalism.

Gould's rejection of design may seem rationally to shut down flights of speculative thought, but this Gould imagines conducting a giant counterfactual experiment, which he calls 'replaying life's tape', making him an unlikely (and underacknowledged) theorist of the relationships between evolutionary thought and the speculative imagination. His discussion revolves around the Burgess Shale, a Cambrian-era fossil bed discovered high in the Canadian Rockies in 1909 by Charles Walcott, who painstakingly classified the wealth of new species he discovered, drawing lines of genealogical descent from the fossil remains to current organisms. This was a treasure trove, he thought, of missing

6. S.J. Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), 320.

links between ancient and modern life-forms. He was working from a flawed starting point, however, which was Darwin's own assumption of 'phyletic gradualism', in other words the belief 'that new species arise from the slow and steady transformations of entire populations'[7]—the same 'stately march' model that described man's inexorable and intended ascent. It was not surprising that Walcott had reached this conclusion, for Darwin had long been aware of the poverty of the fossil record, and had accommodated the missing remains of thousands of generations of incremental gradations in species history by assuming that they had simply not been found: the absence of evidence was not evidence of absence. Here, at last, was such evidence, or so it seemed.

Sadly not: instead, later interpreters came to realize that the rich bed of remains was better described as a mortuary than a family tree: this was a tale of mass extinction, and forms of life that had left no descendents; these were the discontinued paths of natural history. Also, it may not have been the fittest species that survived, but those organisms that *happened* to be better suited to survival in the



7. N. Eldredge and S.J. Gould 'Punctuated Equilibria: An Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism', in T.J.M. Schopf (ed.), *Models in Paleobiology* (San Francisco: Freeman Cooper, 1972), 82–115: Eldredge and Gould, 'Punctuated Equilibria,' 84.

These are natural history's turning points, comparable to the counterfactual historian's nominated points of departure: the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 or the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917

altered conditions following a cataclysmic natural disaster: a sudden period of warming, cooling, or chemical make-up of air or water. This was the argument Gould laid out in a co-authored paper of 1972, on 'Punctuated Equilibria'—the name the authors coined to describe the drastic, periodic events that recalibrated the otherwise gradual variations of flora and fauna. This diagram illustrates the particular moments which are charged with special significance and contingency; they are natural history's turning points, comparable to the counterfactual historian's nominated points of departure: the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 or the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917 for example.

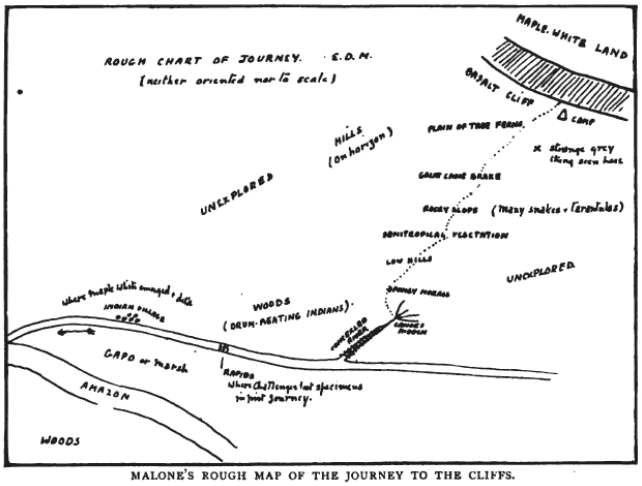
Counterfactual histories rely on something like this evolutionary model of bifurcation and variation, and they imagine the alternative lines of historical descent that *might* have occurred at these privileged moments of contingency—and I'll say what is problematic about this later.

But in the sphere of evolutionary biology, how could we possibly test this hypothesis, that the survivals and extinctions of natural life are not determined solely by the internal logic of variation and competition; in other words, that natural history is determined from the distribution of starting conditions? Gould proposes the experiment of 'Replaying Life's Tape': that is, to rewind history to the Cambrian moment 500 million years ago, and 'see' if the same species survive, a procedure in which humans would have a special interest as the designers of the experiment: would *we* survive another roll of the dice? This is an experiment that can't be run, except in speculative fiction; H.G. Wells for instance chose to imagine a copy earth in his 1905 novel, *A Modern Utopia*, one where there was 'like our planet, the same continents, the same islands, the same oceans and seas'; and even 'every man, woman, and

child alive has a Utopian parallel.'[8] Only on the basis of a common starting position, can the utopian difference be explored; Wells was a writer who divided the history of science fiction into two phases: its naïve phase of fanciful imaginings, and its modern phase, after the point when 'Darwin quickened the thought of the world'.[9]

Of course we can't re-run a half-billion years of history—although in a 1988 experiment, 12 samples of the fast-breeding *e-coli* bacterium were separated and have been followed through their 50,000 or so generations.[10] Writers of fiction can, however unscientifically, apply the experimental procedure to human life, and to do so need to isolate the experimental sample behind a near-impassable geographical feature. To take a few examples from the period I usually study, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: in *Erewhon* ('Nowhere' backwards), the satirically inverted society requires a near-impossible mountain ascent; *Mizora: A Prophecy* (Mary Bradley-Lane, 1881) is an all-female utopia located inside the earth and accessed via the North Pole; *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (James De Mille, 1888) is another lost world, this time in the south-polar regions and requiring a treacherous passage past rocks and monsters. In all of these, as with the better-known *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1916), these alterity of these lost-world societies is founded on their remoteness and the near-impossibility of communication between the culture and civilization of the modern world, and the alternative one. It is, *literally*, an 'enclave within real social space'.

And all of these examples adopt the same operation of return and variation of Gould's experiment, which is also the narrative form of the alternate (or counterfactual) history, where we nominate a point in the past and imagine divergence. In these lost-world narratives, a small population has retreated or been forced into seclusion, from where (and when) an alternative line of historical development and social organization becomes thinkable. Isolation is



MALONE'S ROUGH MAP OF THE JOURNEY TO THE CLIFFS.

a condition of difference. As this diagram from the original publication in 1912 shows, in Arthur Conan Doyle's novella *The Lost World*, the explorers follow a route up the Amazon, then explore a minor tributary, and then another that is almost invisible to view, as they journey back up evolutionary pathways towards the sheer cliffs of the plateau-fortress (where, if you don't know the story, dinosaurs have survived—see the following original illustration of a strangely chicken-like Stegosaurus). In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novel, *Herland*, another plateau isolates the all-female society, whose freedom from men (and acquired miracle of parthenogenesis) has immensely improved their physical and mental powers—the presentation in fiction of ideas about evolution and gender that she developed in *Women and Economics* (1898). In a carefully worked image, the three Victorian adventurers encounter three young women on arriving in Herland, who climb a large tree to keep a safe distance from the intruders. The men climb after them and assume themselves to have the upper hand, as they control access to the main trunk of the tree, and the women retreat out along the branches; however,

> They dropped from the ends of the big boughs to those below, fairly poured themselves off the tree, while we climbed downward as swiftly as we could. We heard their vanishing gay laughter, we saw them fleeting away in the wide open reaches of the forest, and gave chase, but we might as well have chased wild antelopes.[11]

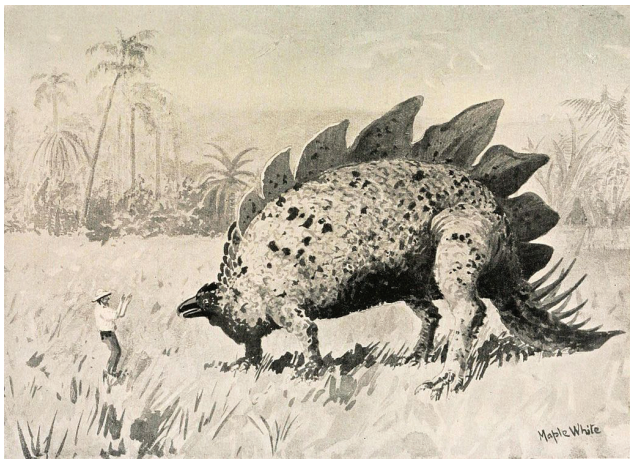
8. H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1905), <https://archive.org/stream/modernutopi00well#page/n7/mode/2up>, 24.

9. Ibid., 4.

10. S. Rose, 'Coloured Spots v. Iridescence', *London Review of Books*, March 22, 2018, 40.

11. C.P. Gilman, 'Herland', in D.D. Knight (ed.), *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 1–143: 18–19.

Through their superior agility and speed that leaves the men clinging awkwardly to the tree of human biological ancestry, as they drop down from branch to branch, the women demonstrate the possibility of alternative evolutionary *descent*.



The Island as Paradigm

To contemplate difference, one needs isolation—and the exemplary geographical feature of separation is the *island*, with which it has an common etymology. The first recorded usage in English is in 1807, to describe England's *isolation* from continental Europe, so the UK's current departure from the European Union is another in a long list of experiments taking place away from the mainland—we're told a new utopia is ahead of us, or possibly that our future is going to be something more like *The Island of Dr Moreau*. In Darwin's and Wallace's addresses to the Linnean Society of London in 1858, Darwin invokes a notional island in order to illustrate the effects of environmental factors on population:

> But let the number of inhabitants be small, as on an island, and free access to it from other countries be circumscribed, and let the change of conditions continue progressing (forming new stations), in such a case the original inhabitants must cease to be as perfectly adapted to the changed conditions as they were originally.[12]

The significance of the isolated location, access to which is 'circumscribed', is complex, for its illustrative power depends on both its difference and its consistency with the world outside of it. In the

12. C. Darwin and A. Wallace, 'On the Tendency of Species to Form Varieties; and on the Perpetuation of Varieties and Species by Natural Means of Selection', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Linnaean Society of London* 3: 9 (August 1, 1858): 45–62: 49.

To contemplate difference, one needs isolation—and the exemplary geographical feature of separation is the island

passage quoted here, Darwin is describing the formation of 'varieties' which have departed from the form of the parent species and he requires a location where such processes could take place in isolation in order to be apparent. The consequent variations only become visible as differences from the species forms which had mistakenly been thought of as immutable. The critical importance of the island for evolutionary thought is clear from its appearance at the precise moment when Darwin first presents the theory of descent with variation. It is also a site where beliefs about the earliest state of human society could be formed; E. B. Tylor cites the case of the Bounty mutineers who regressed to a more primitive state when marooned on Pitcairn Island, and Edward Morgan illustrates his claims about the earliest family groups ('gentes') by referring to native Australians, described as 'these islanders in their secluded habitat'.[13] When Francis Galton anticipates the better humans that might be produced through eugenic breeding, he explains that they would not be 'supernaturally added to the stock of nature, but rather as *a segregation* of what already existed, under a new shape, and as a regular consequence of previous conditions'.[14] Evolutionary theory is illustrated, in its earliest expressions, by reference to the island habitat, and its application to the improvement of society also defines its aspirations through figures of isolation, or 'segregation'.

In the address of 1858, Wallace presented his paper 'On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type'. Instead of making the enclosed space of the island the illustrative setting for the emergence of new varieties, he begins with the case of domesticated varieties. The ability of agriculturalists and breeders to create new varieties of

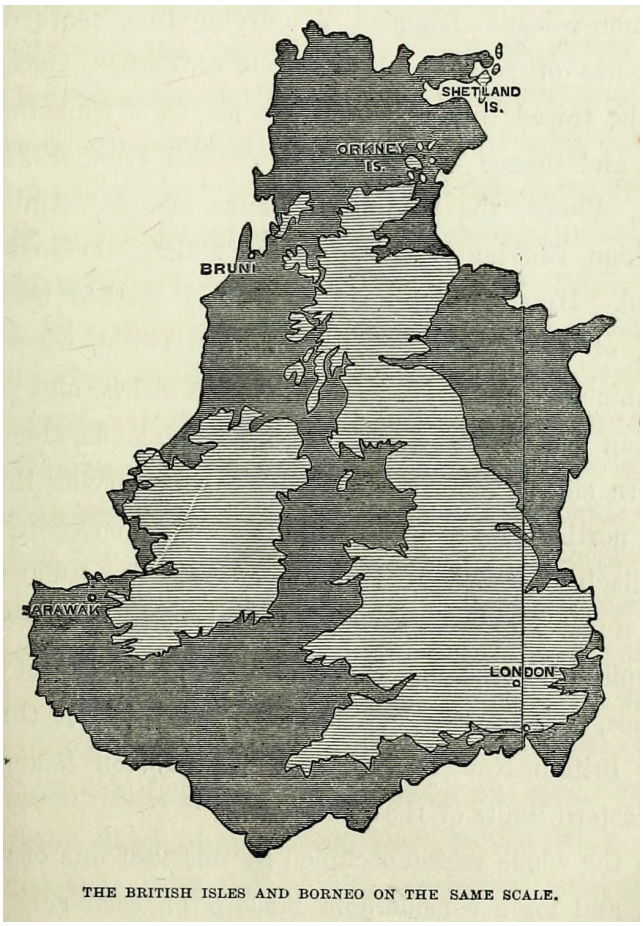
13. E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*. Vol. 1. (London: John Murray, 3rd revised edition 1891, 2 vols), vol. 1, 46; L.H. Morgan, *Ancient Society; or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilization* (Chicago: Kerr, 1910), 49.

14. F. Galton, *Hereditary Genius* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1869), 375–76 (emphasis added).

dogs and cattle in a relatively short space of time was taken to be evidence of the immutability of species in conditions of nature—consider the way that breeds of dog rapidly 'return' to earlier broad types. Wallace argues, against this view, that the processes of descent and variation are universal but that in conditions of domesticity, the variations produced are not subject to the competition for resources among organisms in nature: 'The life of wild animals is a struggle for existence', he writes, incorporating Thomas Malthus's expression.[15] Unlike its wild cousins, the domestic animal 'has food provided for it, is sheltered, and often confined'.[16] This isolation from nature has a double role of explanation; it demonstrates *difference* ('Our quickly fattening pigs, short-legged sheep, pouter pigeons, and poodle dogs could never have come into existence in a state of nature');[17] but it also illustrates the operation of universal processes to which animals both in nature and under domestication are subject.[18]

The isolated site of discovery is also, in the language of science fiction studies, one where the familiar can become estranged and brought into unexpected relations with the fantastical and scarcely imagined

The island is paradigmatic for evolutionary theory through its double function of example and exception. It illustrates evolution's universal rule of descent with variation, but does so by showing examples of *difference* that emerge when variation take place in the isolated conditions of domestication or the island. Its paradigmatic status compares with the linguistic *example* of a rule which, Giorgio Agamben writes, 'is excluded from the rule not because it does not belong to the normal case but, on the contrary, because it exhibits its belonging to it'. The island, similarly, 'is excluded through the exhibition of its inclusion'.[19] For both Darwin and Wallace, the island (and inaccessible plateau or valley) illustrates



THE BRITISH ISLES AND BORNEO ON THE SAME SCALE.

the variations that were produced by a rule to which all examples in nature were subject, but could not be discerned if those exemplary sites did not present themselves in all their apparent strangeness. These variant forms are bound, in uncanny relation, to the other 'variations' that are most familiar to us—domestic animals such as the breeds of dog and cow. The isolated site of discovery is also, in the language of science fiction studies, one where the familiar can become *estranged* and brought into unexpected relations with the fantastical and scarcely imagined. When early anthropologists seek to establish similarly universal laws that could be applied to the development of human societies, the isolated society (the lost world) is again invested with the power to explain, exemplify and estrange. Wallace includes this cartographical image to illustrate to readers the size of this unexplored island that to them is some remote, unknown place, and by placing Great Britain within it, the familiar and the unknown are also put into an uncanny, estranging relation.

A particularly rich example of the imbrication of anthropological and natural-historical contemplation that island settings permitted is Wallace's chapter on

15. Darwin and Wallace, 'On the Tendency of Species to Form Varieties', 54.

16. Ibid., 60.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 54.

19. G. Agamben, 'What Is a Paradigm?', in *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (New York: Zone, 2009), 9–32: 24.

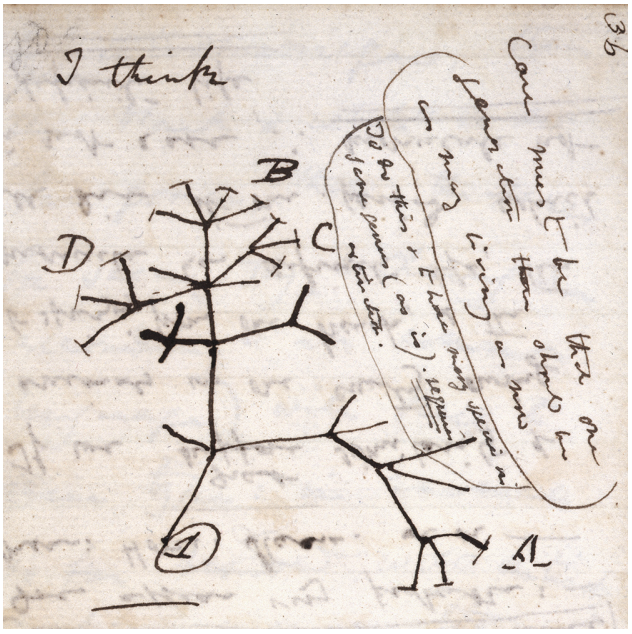
the Aru Islanders in *The Malay Archipelago* (1869). After a long hunt, the author finally holds a live specimen of a Bird of Paradise and meditates on the multiple and global causes which have brought the naturalist into direct encounter with this small, extravagantly decorated bird:

> The remote island in which I found myself situated, in an almost unvisited sea, far from the tracks of merchant fleets and navies; the wild luxuriant tropical forest, which stretched far away on every side; the rude uncultured savages who gathered round me—all had their influence in determining the emotions with which I gazed upon this 'thing of beauty'.[20]

The setting was conceived as a series of concentric circles, by turn anthropological and natural: oceans, the island, its forests and the bird itself alternate with the sailing ships of modern man, the 'uncultured savages' and the naturalist. Each seems to occupy its proper place in this stable and separate sequence of spheres, with modern western man in both the first and last place of this topographical series: he is the present as the creator of maritime networks of trade and force at the perimeter, and as the (sensitive) naturalist at the centre.

And it was precisely this variation possible in island environments, this overdevelopment of secondary sexual characteristics, that was Gilman's principal example of the unhealthiness of modern western society: the Peacock, whose extravagant tail made him unfit for any competition other than display.

So far we have been dealing with relatively clean lines of descent and variation, and not much entanglement. Several of the variant societies described in lost-world, utopian fiction are alarmingly white and blond-haired, and reflect the enthusiasm for racial purity that shadows the application of evolutionary thought to human societies, and utopian imaginaries; and eugenics as a form of utopian thinking reinstates a sense of natural history as teleological, governed by progress and an identifiable destination. When Francis Galton, the father of the term and science of eugenics, wrote that the forces of natural selection were driving mankind towards 'some great and common end of evolution', he was not speaking of the contingencies and randomness of nature, but of a historical force that naturally pointed upwards towards a genetically improved future.[21] This is a problem I don't want to talk about here. Instead, I want to think about how the imagination of divergence was turned *against* certainties of historical progress, and by doing so was able to envision human society as an ongoing network of alternatives and possibilities.



Thinking against History

Of course Darwin himself was susceptible to ideas of improvement and degeneration that his original hypothesis did not require: this drawing on a scrap of paper seems to record the moment of his insight: 'I think'. History is perceived as a branching pattern of alternatives, and with this insight comes a sense of contingency and multiplicity. Tina Choi puts it very elegantly, when she writes: 'The world as Darwin encourages us to see it practically shimmers with the reflections and images of those other forms, attributes, and instincts, those that might have been and those that might yet be.'[22]

And the single illustration that the mostly forgotten French philosopher Charles Renouvier includes in his vast work of alternate history is strikingly

20. A.R. Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of the Orang-Utan and the Bird of Paradise, a Narrative of Travel with Studies of Man and Nature* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 444.

21. Galton, *Hereditary Genius.*

22. T.Y. Choi, 'Natural History's Hypothetical Moments: Narratives of Contingency in Victorian Culture', *Victorian Studies* 51:2 (Winter 2009), 275–97: 291.

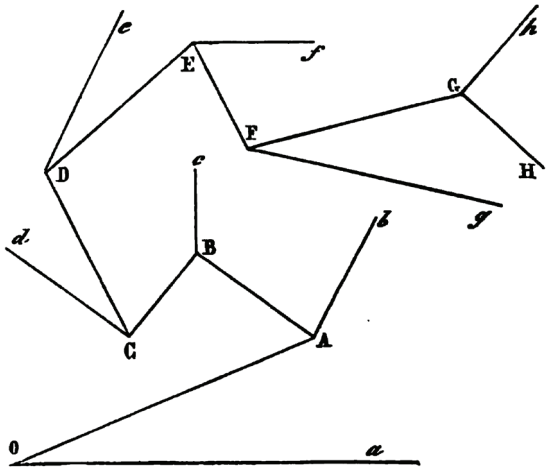
similar. The work's title coins the term 'Uchronia' (or 'Uchronie'), following the pattern of utopia the non/good place; the second part of the title is 'An apocryphal historical sketch of the development of European civilization not as it was, but as it might have been.' Renouvier's complicated chronology is presented as a found document, originally written in secret by a dissident French monk, who was burned at the stake in 1601 by the Inquisition. In this heretical version of European history, Marcus Aurelius decides to impose a 25-year dictatorship in order to restore the conditions of the first republic, and to demarcate the spheres of democratic rule and the practices of religious ceremony—in particular those of the Christian church.

The legal protections of rights as the basis for politics gradually take hold and a different Europe emerges, whose political, social, military, and economic history is carefully detailed: the same technological and political challenges of history, and again the authority of the church and wars of religion threaten to destabilize European civilization; but—so Renouvier's imaginary goes—a more secular European political culture is better able to withstand these shocks, and advances more rapidly than the history of our time, with its regular and devastating wars of religion. The comparison is complicated by the fact that in this *uchronia*, the Olympian calendar is maintained, so the years are dated 800 years *later* than they would be according to our Gregorian calendar. However, this 800-year difference contracts, because the progress of the alternate history is more rapid than our own, so advances in scientific and political culture take place sooner. By the last of the five narrative 'tableaux', the level of social and political culture in the Olympian year 1800 (which would be 1000 in the Gregorian calendar) is roughly the same as that of the year 1800 in the Gregorian calendar. In the words of a reviewer of the 1901 edition: Europe 'seems to have caught up with, by the ninth century, the intellectual and moral condition of our modern civilization'.[23]

As if that wasn't enough to think about, this hypothetical historical narrative has a complex editorial apparatus: there is a foreword written by a modern-day editor (whom we take to be Renouvier), followed by an appended account of the the author's life and death by the work's first guardian; there is another appendix, written by the son of the author of the previous editorial section, and a third appendix by the grandson, who considers historical events in our timeline since the work's supposed composition, and compares them with the imaginary ones. There are also long footnotes throughout, which comment on the divergence of histories, an activity that becomes increasingly difficult to follow as two calendars are in use, whose dates are steadily converging, as I have said. Finally, there is a conclusion by the last editor (Renouvier), which refers to the work's 'doubly apocryphal storyteller' and reflects on the difficulty of constructing such alternatives:

> To speak truthfully, one must talk of the impossibility, not simply the difficulty, of a satisfactory portrayal, if one reflects on the entangled hypotheses that press upon the steps of the alternate historian.[24]

Renouvier is, of course, correct, and addresses the most serious problems with the truth claims, or 'plausibility' claims of counterfactual history: if we look back and privilege one historical moment with the quality of contingency—capable of being otherwise—then it is slightly odd to describe a series of consequences that would have followed. Here, the horizontal bottom line oa is history as it happened, and the line *oA* is the hypothetical departure; but how, Renouvier asks, can we proceed to *AB*, *BC*, etc., when at each of these points (and every one in between), history could have diverged again, in



23. Anon. '[Review:] Uchronie. L'utopie dans l'histoire par Ch. Renouvier', *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 9:2 (March 1901), 1–2: 2.

24. C. Renouvier, *Uchronie (l'utopie Dans l'histoire): Esquisse Historique Apocryphe Du Développement de La Civilization Européenne Tel Qu'il n'a Pas Été, Tel Qu'il Aurait Pu Être* (Paris: Bureau de la Critique Philosophique, 1876), 408.

other ways entirely? What, we can ask reasonably, is the point of the speculative exercise?

Renouvier's purpose is to resist the legacy of the Enlightenment philosophes of history, and its presentation as a system governed by mechanisms of progress, which must, axiomatically, see the medieval past as superior to classical culture, and the present as superior to all previous historical periods.[25] While acknowledging the problems of counterfactual presentation, he refers in the conclusion to 'the common illusion of necessity', and suggests that by writing such a book, the author 'would have fought, and—who knows—maybe shaken the prejudices which overt or covert fatalism has as its root. He would have written, even if chimerical and faulty, a useful book'.[26]

The usefulness of such a work lies in its resistance to necessity; specifically the necessity of progress

The usefulness of such a work lies in its resistance to *necessity*, then; specifically the necessity of progress. In the preface, he describes the mistaken conception of history as being 'determined by its precedents, and all these events written in advance in who knows what eternal decrees'.[27] The anti-Catholic message of the book should not lead us to think that this, is really just an argument for the benefits of separation of church and state; Renouvier's real interest is the nature of history itself—as was the case for Stephen J. Gould in *Wonderful Life*. Renouvier withdrew from public life after the seizure of French government by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte in 1851, and worked prolifically through this and the next decades. Living in a small house in the forest outside Paris, 'with a garden and cow', he began working on his *Essaies de Critique générale*—a title which undersells these writings somewhat: the first 'essay' of 1853 was an *Analyse générale de la Connaissance: Bornes de la connaissance*, over 600 pages, and virtually ignored according to one of the few anglophone intellectual historians who writes about him.[28] Undeterred, his second, again vast, essay of 1859 treated *L'Homme, la Raison, la Passion, la Liberté, la Certitude, la Probabilité morale*. The third and fourth essays followed over a 10-year period, *Les Principes de la Nature*, and *Introduction à la Philosophie analytique de l'Histoire* (1864).

In the latter, he considers 'history' to be something which cannot be examined according to principles of logic, or through the application of concepts from the future, for to do so is to exclude oneself as a historical subject whose tools, concepts, and motivations are themselves the products of history—the very domain that they are called upon to analyse. For Renouvier, history is a field of knowledge production that changes over time as humans acquire specific capacities that enable them to study themselves. I'm struck by two things here: first, that no one has—as far as I know—recognized Renouvier's very early formulation of historical knowledge as a reflexive process of self-discovery. And second, that this *reflexive* moment, of the recognition of the *nature* of history, is comparable to the moment of evolutionary knowledge—when 'Darwin quickened the thought of the world'—and the human species developed ('evolved') a sufficient level of intelligence to recognize the nature of its own history (as something that could be seized hold of) through that natural-historical process.

On the reflexive character of historical knowledge, Renouvier writes of the faculty that 'corrects, refashions, reorders without cease the judgements of individuals and societies, acts, events, in a word, history'.[29] Now, this self-referentiality of knowledge (where 'history' is presented as the accumulation of regimes of judgement developed by human societies) seems to to anticipate Foucault's positions as I understand them—so it's amusing that even the syntax is so Foucauldian, with its enumerative excesses of the verbs and nouns. And in its idea, it recalls for me Foucault's late project of studying the past to dismantle historical assumptions: 'to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable

25. W. Logue, *Charles Renouvier, Philosopher of Liberty* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 107.

26. Renouvier, *Uchronie*, 412.

27. Ibid., viii.

28. J.A. Gunn, 'Renouvier: The Man and His Work (I)', *Philosophy* 7:25 (January 1932): 42–53.

29. C. Renouvier, *Introduction à la philosophie analytique de l'histoire: les idées, les religions, les systèmes* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1896), 551.

it to think differently'.[30] This is entirely compatible with Renouvier's justification of the form, in the conclusion to *Uchronie*, that the work 'can demonstrate the probability that course of events *could have been profoundly different*'.[31] And his distinction in the *Introduction to the Analytical Philosophy of History*, that 'there is nothing so easeful to the human spirit as to acknowledge established facts, nothing so difficult as to comprehend and *disentangle the immensity of what might have been*.'

The conspiracy theory can function as a counter-narrative of historical development

Conspiracies All Around

Entanglement serves as a figure not just for alternate-historical thought and literature, but also for conspiracy theories. Both are narrative forms that meditate on the differences and convergences of 'official' reality and an alternative one. Catherine Gallagher, in her analysis of Philip K. Dick's alternate history novel, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), set in a version of America, post WW2, that is partitioned between the Germans and the Japanese, convincingly argues that what the format shows us is that 'in some "essential" way, the Allies lost the war' in *this* historical world.[32] Likewise, the conspiracy theorist assures his (usually his) listeners that the Illuminati, Masons, Bilderberg group are the *real* masters, and the visible government is merely a façade. In both categories, the visible, apparent world is subject to a variant narrative as a sort of *critique*. In his study of spy and detective fiction, Luc Boltanski compares these suspicious genres to sociology, both of which 'constantly test the *reality of reality*, or to put it another way, challenge apparent reality and seek to reach a reality that is more hidden, more profound and more real.'[33] Conspiracism relies on patterns of entanglement and disentanglement. The study of conspiracy culture has often denigrated conspiracy fiction and conspiracy belief as an intellectual failure; Fredric Jameson describes it as 'garish' and as 'degraded':

> Yet conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system.[34]

The complexity of late capitalism, he claims, provokes patterns of literary form (the conspiracy narrative) and spatial figure (the labyrinth), which although not new in themselves come to act as a signature for new patterns of flow and exchange. But this is too restrictively modernist, and, I would say, too pathological: conspiracy perception as a kind of sickness, of the paranoid, over-observational, apophenic type. In this scheme, history progresses from machine age to machine age, and the patterns of conspiracy and labyrinth are failures of imagination, a sort of detritus of the mind that piles up between the individual and a proper understanding of the world. But the conspiracy theory can function as a counter-narrative of historical development: in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842), the titular character is an immortal Rosicrucian agent wedded to a project of world revolution. Whether in speculative fiction or evolutionary biology, excavated remainders and variations can disrupt linear history, and lead it into an entangled forest.

30. M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 2: The Care of the Self*, tr. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), 9.

31. Renouvier, *Uchronie*, 411.

32. C. Gallagher, 'War, Counterfactual History, and Alternate-History Novels", *Field Day Review* 3 (2007): 52–65: 65.

33. L. Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 32.

34. F. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), 80.