
Christopher Prendergast
COUNTERFACTUALS
Paths of the Might have Been
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Christopher Prendergast

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Look at what's in front of you,
but think about what is missing.
Benedict Anderson

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INTRODUCTION THE CONJECTURAL BREEZE OF TIME

That blind chancy darkness which we call the future.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

I

'We pass forks in the road and forget them, concentrating in memory only on the single road we took.' This is Michael Wood (in his superb *The Road to Delphi*) on 'story' and how we typically read narrative, ruthlessly culling what might obstruct our unilinear through-movement to what happens both next and finally. This relentless drive can, however, be checked and complicated (it is what a writer like Proust, for example, does all the time with Time, crucially including the time of reading). But there is also something else, and in several ways it furnishes the guiding rationale of this book. Wood recounts an unexpected experience while reading a work by the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss that gave him electrically charged pause for thought: 'I remember being shocked, even outraged, when I read in Lévi-Strauss's book on totemism that what actually happens in any given situation is just one of the logical possibilities on offer.' Shock (and even outrage) give way, however, to the acceptance of an invitation: 'he was inviting us to see the fork in the road', the place where the 'actual' and the 'possible' meet in a relation of productive tension, the relation between what 'actually happens' and what might have happened in its place. Finally, there is also something recovered: 'a form of freedom in imagining even lost possibilities,

especially lost possibilities, if we can avoid the forlorn nostalgia that goes with such exercises . . . We could be reminding ourselves that our choices are choices, and that not even an oracle can take this freedom from us.'[1]

Some of this is, of course, debatable. It is doubtful, for example, that Oedipus – whom Wood goes on immediately to discuss, and who will also appear in this book (at a fork in the road he doesn't take) – would be completely at home with the thought that his 'choices' really were *his* (or at least only his), given what he eventually learns to his tragic cost: that the script had been entirely pre-written, and an abbreviated (and enigmatic) version of it entrusted to the oracle at Delphi. Historical variation and cultural difference will thus call for much discrimination in connection with the reach of the 'we', 'us' and 'our' in Wood's account. Nevertheless, the general thrust of his three-stage journey from initial shock through acceptance to recovery remains exemplary for this inquiry – into some of the ways in which the actual, the possible, and the fork in the road furnish the basic coordinates of the counterfactual as it is analysed, narrated and lived.

The counterfactual is a category of thought and language, but its instantiations are plural, not merely because there are lots of them about, but because their types and functions vary greatly. It is one of the aims of this book to show something of that variety, while acknowledging that there is much debate and disagreement about what counterfactuals are plausibly for and how they properly work. They certainly cast a long shadow, from, say, metaphysics to movies. They can take in Heidegger's question 'why is there something rather than nothing?' and reformulate it as what would a possible world look like if it had nothing in it (an intriguing thought-experiment that philosophy does indeed occasionally run[2]). On the more local and less ontologically dizzying plane of two human lives contingently intersecting, there is the film, *Brief Encounter*, in which actual encounter yields the poignant counterfactual encounter over which falls the twilight silhouette of the might-have-been. Its enduring power derives from its understated quality, like a scent that lingers tantalizingly as the perfume of the possible, quite unlike the cheap fragrance splashed all over the might-have-been that irrupts into the cinematic banality appropriately titled *La La Land*.

The latter can stand also as the name of a vast country in the world of counterfactuals, with a correspondingly vast population. There is inevitably a province reserved for wonderings about the careers of movie stars themselves: would Al Pacino have become a star if Robert Redford

had accepted the part of Don Corleone, that sort of thing.[3] We will soon encounter a very special example of this category, in far-fetched but intriguing connection with Baroness Shirley Williams. More broadly, very many inhabitants of La La Land are there courtesy of being close friends of the Queen of neighbouring Wonderland ('why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast'). There will be occasion to visit both countries, most notably in connection with the difficult issue (the topic of Chapter 1) of how to distinguish the silly and the serious. There are some sceptics, principally in the discipline of history, who take the view that in fact pretty well all counterfactuals live here, as a collection of fantastical beings disconnected from what happens on planet earth. One member of the historians' tribe has confessed to suffering 'allergic' reactions when in their company, though this is very hard to separate from polemical fever in the waging of a turf war and the policing of disciplinary boundaries, as if counterfactuals were ill-educated usurpers intent on putting 'normal' history out of business.[4] That is an error, the best antidote for which is perhaps a version of Wood's shock therapy. Polemic, however, is also the name of a further large country in the geography of the counterfactual, and, teeth-gritted, we will also have to go there from time to time. It is part of the price one has to pay for entrance into the places that matter.[5]

These, I have already stressed, are manifold. If huge numbers of unemployable counterfactuals lounge about in La La Land, very many do productive work in an impressive range of disciplines that include philosophy, history, social sciences, economics, art history, linguistics, jurisprudence, cosmology, biology, and cognitive and behavioural psychology. In this book, I roam freely both in and across several of these intellectual territories and disciplinary frameworks (expertise disclaimers registered here), I do so because, unless expressly restricted by deliberate choice, the kind of interests the topic of the counterfactual arouses and sustains almost inevitably entails a form of roaming. The emphasis on range here is not, of course, meant to entail the aim of 'coverage' (an insane ambition, and in any case this is not a 'survey'). It is more a function of what I want to call 'resonance'. By this I mean tuning into how the counterfactual resonates in some of the numerous places where the counterfactual is thought and felt by human beings struggling to understand the world they inhabit from the point of view of what Faulkner majestically terms 'that blind chancy darkness which we call the future', and the retrospective assessments we run when that future in turn

becomes a past. For want of better terms, I have bundled these 'listening' exercises under the general heading of an 'anthropology' of the counterfactual. I use the term primarily, and loosely, in its original sense of the 'study' of the 'human', but also as intersected by the modern, specialized sense of the discipline of social anthropology and the issues associated with notions of cultural difference or even incommensurability. Do all cultures operate counterfactuals, and, if so, to what ends? For example, the allusion to the complicating case of the Oedipus story suggests a larger story of variation, as an instance of a world in which, as Bernard Williams put it, 'counterfactual thought runs into the ground even more readily than it does ordinarily'.[6] We shall see that proposition being put to the test later (in Chapter 4).

But take another example. The grammar and syntax of Chinese do not permit counterfactual constructions after the manner of European languages. What, however, are we to infer from that? It would be odd, even as devotees of the Sapir-Whorf school, to infer solely from this linguistic fact that Chinese people do not think counterfactually or experience feelings of a type involving counterfactual considerations.[7] The only way (for non-Chinese) to find out is, of course, to ask or, in the formally procedural terms of the anthropologist, to carry out some 'field work' with 'informants'. Studies along these lines have produced confusing results. When presented with counterfactual expressions in the form of 'if *x* had been the case, then *y* would/might have ensued', reactions included 'unnatural', 'un-Chinese' and even, in one case, 'evil'. Making sense of them required conversion to statements in the conceptually precautionary form of: '*x* is not the case, but if *x*, then *y*.' On the other hand, Mao, who spoke no European languages, was much taken with counterfactual arguments (expressed in the converted form), with the truly paradoxical consequence that, according to one body of reader-response research, Western readers of his writings found them (in translation) more congenial than many native Chinese readers (in the original). The confused picture points to real conceptual differences, but of an operational rather than substantive nature, to do with the circumstances, terms and conditions under which counterfactual reasoning is put to work. The Chinese example speaks not of conceptual incommensurability, but of a different cultural and cognitive relationship to the counterfactual realm. It suggests less an unfamiliarity with the counterfactual as such rather than an unease around pure hypotheticals known by definition to be false (whence the prefatory addition: '*x* is not the case, but if *x*, then . . .'). Without the introductory

caveat, the counterfactual is seen as either potentially misleading or simply meaningless, a waste of valuable cognitive time.[8]

The question of cultural difference in respect of counterfactuals belongs in the wider anthropological enterprise of the social 'mapping' of Time.[9] When, in Chapter 3, I examine a sixteenth-century painting by Titian, I do so in part from the point of view of a compositional arrangement of faces and gazes that mirrors the modern Western spatial conceptualizations of time: the past lies 'behind', the future 'ahead'. This schema is in turn mapped as a left/right relation; from the spectator's point of view, the past is placed on the left side of the picture and the future on the right. The left/right distribution of time is echoed in the practice of left to right reading and – a point cognitive science makes much of – in the sequencing of ordinals. Some cognitive scientists maintain that this is a universal of mankind's mental ordering of time. Anthropologists are likely to demur, pointing to, for example, the linguistic placing of past and future in Mandarin ('below' and 'above' respectively); or the reversal operated by Aymara, spoken in the Andes region of South America, where the future is 'behind' and the past 'in front'; or the aboriginal Pormpuraawan community in Australia, which spatializes time on a cardinal basis, from east to west, the points of the temporal 'compass' shifting according to how and where the body is positioned.

Do these various conceptual systems and spatial metaphors all enable or even welcome counterfactuals? And if so, do they manifest themselves in the same ways? Is counterfactual thinking more likely to occur in 'modern' societies with life worlds characterized by higher levels of 'choice' and histories with fast acceleration rates that generate 'crisis' moments and decisive turning points more often than in other societies?[10] Are we to think the relation between social time and counterfactuals, if not exclusively then principally, in terms of Reinhart Koselleck's account of the temporalities of 'modernity', as an endless rush towards imagined futures saturated with retrospective might-have-beens, and a correspondingly distinctive relation between memory and forgetting?[11] Is the venerable distinction 'culture' and 'civilization' pertinent here? Régis Debray reminds us of what is at stake in the etymology of the two words: 'culture' goes with 'agriculture' and the relatively settled because repeated rhythms of the rural, while 'civilization' hails from 'civis' and the more agitated life of cities.[12] Might it be that counterfactuals are more prominently a feature of the urban? In short, do counterfactuals matter to 'us' in ways that don't necessarily apply to 'others', such that our thinking

counterfactually about their histories does not coincide with how they think counterfactually about themselves, assuming they do so at all? Is there, in fact, such a thing as the 'time of the other', or is that construction, as Johannes Fabian has argued, merely an ethnocentric prejudice?[13] I touch on aspects of some of these questions in various guises as the book unfolds, but for the most part its frame of reference is limited to the histories with which I am familiar. This necessarily places a question mark over what it means to invoke the earlier sense of 'anthropology', in the belief that what we do with counterfactuals and what they do to us are integral to the task of 'making sense of humanity'. One blunt response to the question mark might be to say: show me a human being who has never, in some form or other, entertained a counterfactual thought, and I'll show you a dead one. This may, of course, be a mistake.

Against that background, the book falls broadly into two halves. The opening three chapters lay some ground work. The first chapter grapples with the criterion of 'scale' in various dimensions to consider how far the remit of the counterfactual can extend before becoming unmanageable, implausible or downright silly, while nevertheless maintaining that the stretch is far greater than many accounts allow for. To that end, I resurrect, along with some other examples, the canonically discredited because allegedly laughable example of Cleopatra's Nose to suggest that it is in fact no laughing matter. The second chapter investigates the complex relation of the counterfactual and the factual by raising some questions in connection with what we understand 'facts' to be and the conditions under which we access them. Special thanks are here due to Kellyanne Conway for the helpfully clarifying addition of the category of the 'alternative fact', with which the counterfactual should never be confused. The latter is at once a derivative and a dependent of fact, not its adversary. It can however also be deployed as a sceptical instrument with which to work critically on the factual order, by opening up what is ideologically 'cemented' into it. This chapter describes some of the ways in which that can be done, as part of what we can call a 'politics' of the counterfactual.[14] The third chapter takes up temporary abode with the angels in the house of art history, in particular revisiting Klee's *Angelus Novus* and the place of the counterfactual in Walter Benjamin's celebrated interpretation of Klee's image (renamed as the 'Angel of History'), while also pausing over Titian's more secular way with time in painting (his late work, the *Allegory of Prudence*). The Klee–Benjamin sources are windows onto thinking about the counterfactual energies buried in ruined pasts, and, specifically

in connection with Benjamin, the utopian dimension of counterfactual thought experiments. Titian's painting takes us on a journey through life's 'seasons' and turning points, with a first intimation of the story of 'Hercules' Choice' and the related core emblem of the crossroads.

Chapter 4 – on the 'Crossroads' theme – is in some respects the pivotal chapter. A junction point for many of the book's principal concerns, it is also where the figurative 'paths' of my title acquire literal form. The crossroads is the place of the 'fork(s) in the road' and the moment of dilemma and decision, haunted not only by the mythological goddess, Hecate, but also by counterfactual scenarios of the ways in which things might have gone. I illustrate something of the cultural history of crossroads symbolism with three journey-tales taken respectively from antiquity (Oedipus), the late middle ages (Petrarch) and the early modern period (Ignatius of Loyola). They track a development from a story of over-weening confidence to tales exemplifying the modern confrontation with doubt.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore aspects of the human, all-too-human, act of looking back to forks both taken and not taken. The first is on the theme of 'regret' in relation to the long history of the Greek concept of *metanoia*, ending with the cultural attitudes and legal practices associated with the phenomenon of 'buyer's regret'. The second deals with questions of personal 'identity', especially what can go awry when certain kinds of counterfactual thinking threaten to undermine the sense of a self by bringing us to imagine ourselves as either 'someone else' or 'no-one' at all (most radically in the wish never to have been born). The final chapter, however, reopens the question of the respects in which counterfactuals support the construction of divided and multiple identities, by looking at what it is that enables a writer such as Fernando Pessoa to say of himself 'I am what I am and am not'.

II

'A form of freedom in imagining', governed by certain constraints, is a useful formula for counterfactually driven inquiry. I emphasize 'constraint' here, for the general reason already mentioned (staying clear of La La Land), but there are other more particular reasons. One has to do with the association of 'imagination' with imaginative literature and more specifically the genres of literary fiction. This is not one of the concerns of

this book. It begins, of course, epigraphically with a novelist, and the latter (William Faulkner) will reappear at various junctures, along with many other passing literary references and a more extended look at Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The book also ends by handing the baton to literature (with Fernando Pessoa as the runner). However, I largely bypass questions to do with counterfactual fictions or counterfactuals in fiction, partly because there is already a substantial body of work in this area, some of which is outstanding (most notably by Catherine Gallagher). Gallagher has raised interesting and important issues of meaning and reference in connection with 'the peculiar language game of certain kinds of fiction', and her answers can scarcely be bettered. One of her examples is Napoleon Bonaparte in three different discursive settings: a personal letter (the one in which Hegel describes Napoleon as 'world history on horseback'), a novel (Tolstoy's *War and Peace*) and a counterfactual history (Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Château's *Napoléon et la conquête du monde*). Gallagher resurrects the question as to whether in these generically different contexts the proper name can be taken to refer to the 'same' person. How can a Napoleon actually seen by Hegel in Jena, who appears on the same battlefield as the fictional character Pierre Bezukhov, or who in Geoffroy-Château's alternative history does something that never happened (march on St Petersburg), be the 'same' person? Gallagher's own answer, in the face of certain theoretical objections, is a robustly argued 'yes, he is'.[15] On the other hand, there is something about this question that can potentially threaten one's sanity, akin perhaps to what happens in the grimly hilarious counterfactual plot of the novel, *L'Homme qui se prenait pour Napoléon* by Laure Murat. Napoleon escapes from St Helena and returns clandestinely to Paris. When finally he reveals his true identity, he is declared a mad imposter and taken to the Charenton asylum, where he discovers that all the inmates are lunatics suffering from the same delusion (of being none other than who he actually is, Napoleon Bonaparte).

There is, however, another reason for leaving the case of fiction to one side: the epistemological chaos caused by raiding parties launched from the territory of Polemic, whose basic aim (in so far as one can peer through the fog) is to discredit non-fictional counterfactuals by corralling and forcing them into the ill-fitting uniform of the fictional (that is to say, in order to place them on parade as 'mere' fictions). Branding non-fictional counterfactuals as 'fictions' is a common way of dismissing them, but it is rare to encounter the commonplace elevated to the status of a 'fundamental' question about 'borders'. Here is the historian, Richard

Evans: 'the idea of counterfactual history seemed to raise in a new way the fundamental questions about the borders between fact and fiction.'[16] The fact/fiction distinction, of course, runs back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and, whatever the refinements that have been subsequently added, this isn't one of them. Historical counterfactuals are not aids to understanding the boundaries that separate the domains of the factual and the fictional; what they assist is our understanding of the boundaries between the factual and the counterfactual. Evans superimposes one binary on the other and in the process blurs both, the inevitable consequence of a persistent reduction of counterfactual history to being effectively a branch of the 'entertainment' industry, at whose outer limit counterfactual constructions are but 'baroque products of the imagination'.[17] Here and there an effort is made to distinguish the reputably 'useful' and the frivolously 'entertaining', but the distinction keeps buckling beneath the sheer weight of animus to the category as such. The proposition that summarizes the basic claim remains the dismissive one: 'counterfactual history essentially belongs in the same world as these other more obviously fictional works of the imagination.' It doesn't. There are no 'essences' here, and, if there were, they would be quite distinct, if occasionally entering into neighbourly contact.

Despite valiant efforts elsewhere (those of Thomas Pavel, for example[18]) to develop a general account of fiction as a branch of 'possible worlds' theory, backed by a view of counterfactuals as fiction's 'natural habitat', the logic of fiction in general starts from a different place, not in the assumption of a 'what-if', but in the operation of an 'as-if' (the philosopher Vaihinger's *als ob*, adopted by Frank Kermode for the account of the nature of fictional narrative in *The Sense of an Ending*). Counterfactual fictions are a subgenre of the class of fiction in which the 'as-if' is married to a 'what-if', but the two are not the same. Consider the intriguing triple counterfactual, one nested inside another, staged by the opening sentences of Philip Roth's novel, *The Plot Against America* (whose counterfactual premise has Charles Lindbergh beating Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election): 'I wonder *if* I would have been a less frightened boy *if* Lindbergh hadn't been president or *if* I hadn't been the offspring of Jews' (my emphasis). This takes some unpacking. What, for instance, of the counterfactual imagining by the narrator in respect of his birth: 'if I hadn't been the offspring of Jews'. This is fundamental to the novel's strenuous probing of an historical America imagined as radically antisemitic. But it also throws the reader off balance: if our first person narrator hadn't been

born the way he was, then whoever else he would have been, he wouldn't have been him. There is here perhaps a slight nod in the direction of a joke concerning the peculiar things that certain kinds of fiction can do. And then reconsider the counterfactual lobbed into the novel as its first words ('if Lindbergh *hadn't* been president', my emphasis). This works to counter the counterfactual on which the entire novel is based (Lindbergh as president). Suppose we take the narrator's musing seriously and ask what indeed if Lindbergh hadn't won? For the fictional narrator it makes perfect sense to speculate along these lines. For the reader it sends the whole fictional game into a vertiginous spin.[19] There is, for the real-world reader, a possible world that more or less comfortably locks onto the statement 'if Lindbergh had been President' (though not a candidate in the actual election, he was an influential player who could have been the Republican Party's candidate). However, when detached from the voice of a fictional narrator (or rather *this* fictional narrator), it is not so obviously straightforward to posit a world that intelligibly yields a Lindberghian counterpart in respect of the statement 'If Lindbergh *hadn't* been President . . .'[20] It is truly uncanny to encounter a rock-solid historical fact functioning as the counterfactual of a character inside a fiction. But whatever questions this raises, they are distinctively questions for fiction; they cannot be transported elsewhere, and, since they can't, they don't invite us to worry much about 'borders', and still less to fret about illegal crossings.[21]

III

There is also something else this book is not that calls for (lengthier) clarification. While many of the descriptions and arguments in it involve theoretical considerations, in some cases extensively, it does not attempt *a* theory of the counterfactual, nor even a developed contribution to an existing one. While I dissent from some of the grounds on which Geoffrey Hawthorn bases his claim, I fully assent to the claim itself (in *Plausible Worlds*): 'there can be no theoretical answer to the question of precisely which counterfactuals to admit.'[22] These are wise words, often ignored by theoretical legislators and gatekeepers. There is, however, a basic frame, the shape of which I try to describe here. The philosopher who invented the expression 'counterfactual conditionals' (Nelson Goodman) wrote in the opening sentence of the ground-breaking paper in which he introduced the expression: 'The analysis of counterfactual conditionals is no fussy little

grammatical exercise.'[23] It certainly isn't (either fussy or little). It is big, but also most definitely grammatical (Goodman's emphasis is presumably to be taken as rhetorical rather than substantive, a way of stressing the philosophical importance of his topic). The theoretical scaffolding of counterfactuals is undergirded by a sentence type that combines a subordinate 'if' clause and a consequential main clause ('if *x*, then y, where *x* is the antecedent "if" clause and *y* is the responsive clause delivering the entailed or asserted consequent').

The form permits of syntactical and grammatical variation. The syntax can invert ('John might have perceived other options, if he had thought counterfactually'). While in most cases inversion makes no significant difference, classical scholars have claimed that it does affect meaning and emphasis in, for example, Homer and Thucydides. Grammatical variation is essentially a matter of tense and mood, subject to the precise temporal relation in question. Here I am mostly concerned with the 'if' clause in the pluperfect subjunctive ('if John had thought . . .') and the main clause in the perfect conditional ('he might have perceived . . .'). The example of Greek also figures here in providing two terms for these two clauses (which survive only in specialist usages, for the most part in linguistics): *Protasis* and *Apodosis*. To the modern lay ear, these two splendid terms may seem like the names of gods or mythological creatures presiding over the world of conditionality and the empire of the possible. In fact, their morphology suggests more a loving couple than gods, heroes or beasts. The verbal noun *tasis* attached to the preposition *pro* ('before') signifies a 'stretching' – towards, of course, the waiting *apodosis*, which is itself a compound of the preposition *apo* ('back') and the verbal noun *dosis* as a 'giving'. Whence the implication of a bond of reciprocity, the 'before' of the *protasis* reaching for the *apodosis* which turns 'back' to it.

In this model of linguistic mutuality, we find the schematic form of all counterfactual statements and propositions. But like most complex relationships, it is not always easy; it can become notably strained by virtue of controversial views as to what can plausibly go into each clause and what a 'proper' relation between the two might be. In ancient Greece the *protasis–apodosis* structure was deployed in fields as varied as logic, oratory and divination.[24] In the more specialized fields of the modern 'disciplines', everything depends on the nature of the particular counterfactual thought-experiment being conducted and the often fiercely partisan views of what is 'admissible' as either logically or empirically viable ('warranted assertability' is the technical buzzword).

All sentence forms of the relevant type juggle a double temporal perspective: back to a point in time where a hypothetical 'if'-governed change is introduced to the fabric of reality, and then forward to the putative consequences of the switched or modified antecedent. In tracing this double movement, one key issue, especially for the discipline of history, is where the starting point is to be, either looking back to a past from a position of known outcomes, or projecting forwards from the assumed point of view of historical actors facing an as yet unknown future. The two perspectives, of course, interconnect and interact, and can be separated only for analytical purposes. Some, however, have sought to drive a wedge between them, with a view to privileging one over the other.

One school of thought prefers the backwards look; indeed in some quarters it is the very ground of an evaluative distinction between 'good' and 'bad' counterfactual history ('restrained' and 'exuberant' the terms often used).[25] It is certainly the case that with known outcomes as the point of departure, one has a 'restraining' control mechanism for testing hypotheses, usually of a causal sort: by highlighting how something that happened might not have, we arrive at a better explanation of what, as a matter of historical fact, did occur. This is safer and, it is implied, more intellectually respectable than attempts to 'explain' what did not occur as if it (conditionally) had. On the other hand, and especially when proffered as the basis of a prescriptive methodological blueprint, laudable restraint can harden into exclusionary restrictive practices. It is not only nature that abhors a vacuum. If we imagine something that happened as not having happened (the French Revolution, say), the speculative chain does not conveniently halt at a posited historical absence (no French Revolution); a hypothetical something else has to occur in its place. It seems perfectly reasonable to try and develop some tools for thinking about what that might have been: a continuation of the *Ancien Régime* in different historical dress; or, as some have counterfactually proposed, an agreeably modern liberal order whose midwives were agreeably enlightened eighteenth-century aristocrats. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but the view from the stern of the known can end by closing off avenues of inquiry into realms of 'possibility' which it is the job of the counterfactual imagination to explore. Its ideological *reductio*, the all-mastering endpoint that can be reached as one of the potential consequences of the selected starting point, is the infamous End of History, the latter's winners securely on the throne. The backwards look is powerful, but sometimes in the wrong sense of the term.

The alternative starting point faces forwards rather than backwards, immanent to the past in which historical actors individually or collectively contemplate an unknown future as a horizon of the possible, typically in conditions of stress, urgency and perplexity. These are at their most acute when an individual, a group, or an entire society reaches forks in the road, each of which represents, in varying degrees of scale, a different 'option'. The methodological suggestion is to start here, by trying, as best one can, to enter a thought-world at a crossroads moment or on the approach to that moment.[26] More specifically, the principal objects of investigation are the consciously pondered and explicitly recorded thoughts around which gather the might-bes of a future that will become might-have-beens once that future faced has become a future past.[27] This helps us capture something of the weird temporal cartwheel performed by counterfactuals. There is, however, a question as to *where* exactly on the landscapes of the past it can be performed. One objection is that it is at home only in connection with certain kinds of historical interest and inquiry (notably, high politics, diplomacy and warfare), and is accordingly attractive to fans of the 'great men' version of history ('the actions of a few princes and rich men', in Braudel's words).[28] It looks less appealing, or even workable, in respect of the slower-moving rhythms of *longue durée* history, in large measure not only slow or 'cold', but where the anonymity of mass social formations means there is often little if anything by way of recorded 'thoughts' for us to access (what, again, Braudel describes as 'anonymous history, working in the depths, and most often in silence').[29]

For the 'forwards' perspective to be able to capture more, the frame of reference needs to broaden, from the consciously 'thought' to the structurally or systemically 'thinkable' and the terms in which the parameters of the latter are set (collective 'mentalities', historical 'epistemes' and so forth). These circumscribed orders of the thinkable are usually seen as limiting, fixing the boundaries to what can be thought in a given place at a given historical moment and hence setting limits to what can count as an 'option' for historical actors. If in the ancient world you shared Aristotle's view that being a slave was a 'natural' condition, counterfactual musings of an abolitionist kind were not just unlikely to have any place in the thought-world; they were unlikely to have any place there even if one didn't share Aristotle's view. The concern with the limits of the thinkable is thus also a concern with the *unthinkable*, primarily to avoid anachronism and unrealistic expectations. But, along with embargoing illicit imports from one culture or period to another, there is, within a given formation,

also the question of the thinkable and the unthinkable *for whom*. That question involves the social distribution of knowledge, the political control of information, the authority of custom, the availability and understanding of technological resource, and the areas of ignorance remediable by educational means. Mapping that is simply vast, and it is little surprise that historians interested in trying to operate counterfactuals in the context of larger collective movements tend to focus on leaders, advisers and experts in the making and implementing of public policy (what Hawthorn refers to as 'public bodies'). This is not just another version of Great Men history, but, from a Braudelian point of view, there is much it simply cannot encompass.

On the other hand, even where tightly constraining, these systems need to be examined not only for what they exclude but also for what they permit, above all at the outer limits of the historically given universe of the thinkable. When Lucien Febvre took Abel Franc to task for having suggested that Rabelais was a closet atheist, he did not do so on the grounds that the evidence pointed strongly to Rabelais being a believer (it does), but on the larger claim that, in the sixteenth century, atheism was not an option because it was 'unthinkable'.[30] In terms of sixteenth-century intellectual resource, however, there was a strong but no absolute bar to thinking the allegedly 'unthinkable'. The question is not whether an atheist position could be thought, but whether it could be openly stated or published, that is to say, a question of power and authority. When under new pressures that authority weakens, possibilities emerge that can also include an enriched understanding of the might-have-beens or 'lost possibilities' of a past repressed, concealed or dormant in a world poised between the thinkable, the thought and the declared.[31] We can perhaps characterize such examples as existing at the 'edge' of what the culture permits or prohibits, as instances of what (though his purposes here are somewhat different) Hawthorn calls the 'imaginative extensions' of a given thought-world to what 'might have been considered'.[32]

Another way of describing the issue underlying Febvre's claim would be to say that it is less what Rabelais could or might have thought than what he could have *done* with those thoughts. However much our understanding of the 'thinkable' is enlarged by the principle of 'imaginative extension', it has to be steadied by a corresponding sense of the 'doable'. Flying to the moon was not an 'option' for the seventeenth century in the counterfactual form of a missed opportunity merely because one was able to go there in a utopian fiction by Cyrano de Bergerac. The Incas were conversant with the

principle of rotary motion, but did not adopt the wheel for the practical organization of everyday transportation; given the mountainous terrain, it was not a workable option. It is a truism that a counterfactual claim to the effect that such and such could (and might) have been done is meaningful only if it is a fact that it could have been done ('could have' is the modal specifically for the category of the doable). There is, however, space for considerable debate over what that 'fact' about counterfactual possibility truly looks like. As we shall see in Chapter 2, versions of the 'facts' can have an imprisoning rather than an anchoring effect, as the mask that 'realism' wears when acting as the servant of power. It is always important to remember that counterfactuals fold two statements into one: about something that might have been the case, they are also about something that wasn't. The latter can serve in turn as a crisp reminder that in some scenarios there simply were no alternatives. On the other hand, there is the converse, the role of the former as a reminder that the 'no alternative' claim can also be guilty of wishful thinking inducing a (usually self-interested) form of blindness to real possibilities. Historically circumscribed forms of 'how it is' sometimes give you the answer as to why notions of how it might have been are 'fantastic' in the sense of delusional, but sometimes also provide no answer at all other than in the terms of a question-begging ideological diktat. The doable and the non-doable are often, but not always, simply 'given', as realists often seem to imply. If they are given, it is in many cases because they are 'given' by someone, constructed by those who tell others what can and cannot be done, and counterfactually what could and could not have been done. Those constructions are neither immutable nor exempt from critical challenge. That can indeed be one of the tasks of the counterfactual, pressing against the construction in the name of the possibilities it excludes (we will see more of this in Chapters 2 and 3). For now, Emily Dickinson's wonderfully ambiguous poem comes to mind:

What I can do – I will –
Though it be little as a Daffodil –
That I cannot – must be
Unknown to possibility –

To which one response can be: unknown not because not there, but because unseen. The temporal cartwheel of the counterfactual, flipping between the 'before' and the 'after', mixes elements of forecast and retrospect in a manner that disconcerts but that can also illuminate. Echoing the

'hindcast' of meteorology,[33] we can call this the disorientating perspective of the 'retrocast', a form of predicting the past by means of a closer look at the trampled seedbeds in which the little Daffodil stands. There may indeed be no real alternatives, paths strictly unknown to possibility (in which case the counterfactual has no purchase and is generally but a receptacle for idle dreams or disappointed hopes). Or there may be, but as ones scarcely perceptible and, if perceived, not easily taken then and there, outlier options with low chances.[34] But not being front and centre of an individual's or a society's range of options does not mean that they cannot be found elsewhere, at another point along the 'edge', where possibilities gather in the shadowy halfway house between the present and the absent. The classic cases are moments of convulsive transition.[35]

Positing the alternative and then imagining it as adopted belong in the *protasis*, the place where the 'if'-governed substitution occurs. The function of the *apodosis* is to state a view of what consequentially follows. This is, can be only, a probability construction. That, however, excludes retro-prediction of what is sometimes oddly called a hundred per cent probability. If the doable is part of what counterfactuals descriptively refer to (realms of possibility), it is also a constitutive part of counterfactuals themselves, what they themselves can do. Some things they cannot do, at least with any degree of conviction or guarantee of success. Further strain in the *protasis–apodosis* relation can arise from attributing to counterfactuals a capacity for delivering what they are not equipped to deliver. This can stem from either inflated expectations (someone's pipe dream) or wilful misattribution (setting them up to fail where they could never pass). It bears repeating more than once that the tasks that counterfactuals can perform are multiple. But one thing their special combination of conditional and subjunctive elements cannot supply, other than in some highly specialized scientific settings, is a 'proof'. Niall Ferguson highlights a class of historical counterfactuals that, in his eyes at least, glitter diamond-like, but are nevertheless to be found wanting; they are 'brilliantly formulated counterfactual *questions*, not answers' (one of his examples is Hugh Trevor-Roper's reflections on how the seventeenth-century Stuart monarchy could have been preserved).[36] Literally, this is, of course, untrue; the makers of the glittering specimens are all too eager to garland them with answers. What Ferguson means is that they are not *good* answers; they fail to convince. But what counts as a good answer? That depends on what the test is. While – assuming criteria that reasonable people can agree on – some historical counterfactuals are clearly more

plausible than others, none at all can ever qualify as 'proofs'; in that sense they are *always* questions without answers. Experimentally posed and pursued, they do not supply answers other than provisionally; they play with possibility to show that, whatever the historical world is made of, it isn't reinforced concrete. The fact that a question lacks an answer isn't necessarily a reason for not asking it; asking it can be a way of exploring the limits of answerability (useful for everyone including historians). 'The answer must in the end be open' concludes Hawthorn in connection with one of his case studies.[37] That is true of all historical counterfactuals because it is intrinsic to them.

We can take this set of questions further by way of a particular grammatical property of the *apodosis*, specifically the choice of the modal auxiliary, and the various hostages to fortune when the preference is for 'would have' claims. The confidence with which one can enter a 'would-have' counterfactual claim is justified in very few domains of inquiry. The deductive logic of truth-conditional semantics is one such, as is the philosophy of science concerned with theories of causation in terms of what is held to be the law-bound behaviour of physical phenomena. But in any other context, and especially those that involve empirical and epistemic questions of verifiability, that 'would' is extremely precarious, even though we often come across it on parade like some intellectual peacock.[38] The discipline of history is littered with them, not only strutting boldly, but careering like wild horses towards a brick wall of an apodotic outcome.[39] The key issue is that of causation. This is difficult enough in respect of 'normal' history (Hawthorn recommends that we just forget about it). One need only gaze upon the panoply of types and models of causal explanation placed before us by Stephen Mumford and Rani Lill Anjum (physicalist, primitivist, pluralist, dispositionalist and so on);[40] or bury oneself in the marvel of what has to be one of the most beautiful creations of analytical philosophy, the Mackie formula for 'inus-conditions' (insufficient but necessary features of a condition that itself is unnecessary but sufficient);[41] and then, wrapped around all this, the neo-Humean reminder in connection with inferences drawn from the observation of past regularities: correlation is not causation.

How, other than in fiction, one might readily carry that weighty package into the counterfactual realm is anyone's guess, but guessing is all it can be. Counterfactuals, as I intimated earlier, are often used heuristically to test causal explanations of what actually happened; indeed causal explanations can themselves be construed as supplicants at the court of