theories and methodologies

Facts, Fictions, Counterfactuals

CATHERINE GALLAGHER

THE FACTS OF HISTORY HAVE LONG BEEN THOUGHT OF AS CONTINGENT: NOT DETERMINED BY UNCHANGING LAWS OF NATURE OR BY DIVINE will but instead produced by human beings, who are limited by circumstances yet capable of agency. The belief in the contingency of historical facts is an invitation to speculate about what might have happened instead, and the thought experiments we call counterfactual history accept that invitation by imagining alternative historical events. Before the scientific revolution, contingency was thought to be a characteristic of facts in general: the word *fact* was used mainly to describe the time-bound and particular deeds of humankind as opposed to the eternal and general truths of nature. The scientific revolution marked the beginning of a long process in which modern thinkers gradually developed the concept of the fact to mean any observable, freestanding, particular occurrence in history or nature. The idea that there were natural, as well as historical, facts became acceptable, whereas earlier it would have seemed self-contradictory (Shapiro).

The stark opposition between everlasting truths and contingent facts thus became blurrier, yet the difference between widely applicable principles and contingent occurrences survives in distinctions between facts and explanations, generalizations, meanings, hypotheses, and laws. These continue to differentiate generalizations from discernible particulars. Facts still seem to be contingent specifics, and as such they call forth counterfactual speculations, which have become part of the process of turning observations into generalizations. For example, scientists routinely use counterfactuals when they test hypotheses, manipulating variables to discover which factors determine which outcomes. In law courts, too, which focus on human behavior, counterfactual hypotheses help determine guilt, liability, and even the amount of damages paid out in civil cases.

In the discipline of literary studies we do not use counterfactuals to establish or falsify facts or to support hypotheses, nor do we think systematically about the relation between facts and theories, laws, rules, or hypotheses. But the idea of fact is nevertheless integral

CATHERINE GALLAGHER is professor emerita at the University of California, Berkeley, where she held the Eggers chair in English until her retirement. Her most recent book, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Literature*, came out in 2018.

© 2019 CATHERINE GALLAGHER
PMLA 134.5 (2019), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to a fundamental opposition we rely on when classifying and analyzing literary texts: fact vs. fiction. This essay will first try to clarify that distinction by viewing it as a modern version of the difference between facts and general truths. Second, the essay will attempt to provide an unusual perspective on the dichotomy between fact and fiction by examining its disruption and reinvention in texts that rely on counterfactual—rather than simply fictional—particulars.

It might at first seem odd to claim that the contrast between fact and fiction, which became prominent with the invention of the modern novel, was an updated version of the older distinction between contingent particulars and general truths, for we are routinely taught that fiction does not make truth claims. In Philip Sidney's familiar words, it "nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth" (57). Fact, in contrast, might seem the more obvious descendant of truth because it at least seems to denote things that exist in the world. Copyright law might also be said to support the notion that fiction makes truthfulness irrelevant. It defines fictional publications as those that forthrightly present their material as invented, and it is on the basis of original creativity that the characters and plots in fictions fall under copyright protection. According to the law, facts, in contrast, are ineligible for copyright because they are discovered, not invented.

Nevertheless, the association between fiction and some form of truth has a venerable pedigree. Aristotle formulated the connection in the *Poetics* when he explained that poetry yields meaningful generalizations or even universals, whereas history writing relates only accidental particulars: "Thus the difference between the historian and the poet . . . lies in the fact that the historian speaks of what has happened, the poet of the kind of things that can happen. Hence also poetry is a more philosophical and serious business than history. For poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars" (32–33). The factual genre fails to get at the essence of things because it reports events that happened by chance, not events that happened because they are part of the truth of things, what should or must be.

The basic distinction aligning facts with adventitious details and fictions with more generalized meaningfulness has been updated many times, most notably by writers and theorists of the emerging modern novel in the eighteenth century. For example, in *Joseph Andrews* Henry Fielding interrupted his story to provide a short thesis on the nature of realistic fiction, using Aristotle's categories to explain that the novel is true in its generality even though its particulars are merely imaginary: "I declare here, once for all, I describe not men, but manners; not an individual, but a species" (189). His is one of the clearest articulations of the new reliance on mimetic rather than historical truth claims described by Michael McKeon. However, Fielding also needed to revise Aristotle to suit the empirical epistemological assumptions of his age, which held that species, far from having the ontological priority assigned by classical thinkers, were constructed by abstracting efforts of the mind—they were inventions of a special kind. Fielding maintained that the patterns of behavior he portrayed were derived inductively, from his experience among actual people in the world: "I have writ little more than I have seen," the narrator assures us. He then goes on to list instances of the behavior depicted in the novel that are often encountered in reality, concluding, "These are pictures which must be, I believe, known: I declare they are taken from the life, and not intended to exceed it" (190). His argument gives empiricist logic an unusual, neo-Aristotelian third dimension, acknowledging that types are induced from observing facts in the world and also insisting that fictional particulars are then deduced from types and not simply copied from life. Fictionalizing is a process of generalizing from the facts in the interest of creating

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

broadly representative characters and events. Thus, Aristotle's static distinction between the universals of poetry and the particulars of history was revised by eighteenth-century fiction writers into a dynamic, dialectical process, where the facts about actual people inform generalizations, which are epitomized through fictional examples.

To be sure, this modern fiction-fact dialectic was designed to describe realist novels, and it still applies best to such works. How does it hold up in works where the generalizations are not supposed to be induced from facts that are, in Fielding's word, "known"? The remainder of this essay will use counterfactual fictions to defamiliarize the interaction between fiction and fact. At the heart of any historical counterfactual speculation is a past-tense hypothesis consisting of an *if* clause and a *then* clause. Consider the following sentence: If John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated in 1963, then he would have found a way to extricate United States forces from Vietnam in the mid-sixties. The *if* clause is known to be contrary to fact, yet we entertain it in order to explore how possible alternative factors (such as different presidential leadership) would have affected the escalation of the Vietnam conflict. Of course, the facts are not simply ignored in such speculations; the actual history and the invented counterfacts are closely interconnected in ways that preserve but also transform the facts. Moreover, the intense focus on the opposition between fact and counterfact in these narratives increases both the significance of particulars, which are important because they might have been different, and the scope of the generalizations the fiction delivers.

Not all counterfactual writings are fictional. The fictional instances of the mode usually lift their starting premises from nonfictional forms, such as articles and editorials in newspapers and magazines, political debates, or the analyses of academic historians. In many kinds of factual discourse, writers reflect on historical causality by proposing plausible alternatives to uncontroversial facts. For example, many writers who have wondered whether the Civil War was absolutely necessary to bring about the abolition of slavery have considered the hypothesis that if the war had somehow been avoided, then the southern states would soon have ended the institution for economic reasons. As it did in the JFK hypothesis, the *if* clause announces itself as not only different from but emphatically counter to the well-known factual alternative. Such hypotheses obviously rely on prior agreement about the facts being countered, and so they are by no means a part of some postfactual epistemic wave.

That constant recourse to the facts is one of the reasons we do not call academic historians' suppositions fictional. Even when historians invent things, they do so in the conditional mood, and instead of developing lengthy narrative sequences, they usually present numerous alternative short scenarios. Moreover, they analyze the invented scenarios, and, most important, make arguments that rely on further factual evidence: in the debate over the necessity of the Civil War, for example, academic disputants used economic data, statistical modeling, regression analyses, and comparisons with other slaveholding nations like Cuba and Brazil. In history, as in law and science, counterfactuals help to refine questions and open new areas of research; they aid researchers to discover and establish new explanations. So even though their starting hypotheses and secondary suppositions look fictional, they are part of the process of uncovering and evaluating facts.

But counterfactual hypotheses found in historical analyses can also grow into fictional works; both of my examples—an alternative history in which the Civil War had been avoided and one in which Kennedy had not been assassinated—have inspired fictional narratives, which also produce a unique symbiosis between fact and fiction.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These narratives are based on counterfactual premises, but instead of considering numerous alternatives analytically, as historians' narratives often do, they usually trace a single strand of imaginary divergences from the trajectory of actual history. They are written in the indicative mood and follow many established conventions of other fictional genres. Nevertheless, their instead-of structure sets them apart from normal fictions, drawing more attention to their nonfactuality than most fictional narratives. They exaggerate their inventedness by insistently alluding to facts. Paradoxically, they allude to the facts by contradicting them, a practice far outside the norm for fictional works.

When reading any fiction, we have a background awareness of its general nonfactuality, but counterfactual fiction is different. It announces its incompatibility with history as its fictional premise. For example, Philip Roth opens his 2004 novel *The Plot against America* with the narrator wondering "if I would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn't been president" (1). The phrase shifts the narrator's perspective from our common historical viewpoint to one that is as yet unknown to the reader, alerting us to the difference between this novel and the ones Roth normally wrote: instead of accommodating the facts of twentieth-century history, this plot will explicitly contradict them. As readers we do not yet know how Roth's alternative twentieth century came about or how it will shape the private lives of the fictional characters, but our attention to historical facts is heightened by their being assertively countered.

Like counterfactual analytic studies, counterfactual fictions usually seize on key turning points in well-known historical narratives, when multiple paths seemed open, and then imagine the consequences of a specific departure from recorded history. The JFK assassination has especially attracted counterfactualists because it was enabled by many small contingencies, the unlikely conjunction of which was highly improbable. It is easy to alter any one of those precarious factors and thus launch an alternative historical scenario in which Kennedy survives, as he does in several counterfactual fictions: Stanley Shapiro's *A Time to Remember* (1986), Donald James Lawn's *The Memoirs of John F. Kennedy* (2010), and Stephen King's blockbuster *11/22/63* (2011). The counterfactual narrative about JFK that best illustrates the treatment of historical facts in these thought experiments, though, is Jeff Greenfield's 2013 *If Kennedy Lived*, which is not called a novel, because instead of inventing characters it imagines alternative destinies for historical personae. Fictions of this type are known as "alternate histories," and they are particularly assiduous in describing the details of the times, places, and agents at the divergence points, or nexuses, in their narratives. Greenfield focuses on what he considers the most unpredictable detail in the narrative of JFK's actual assassination: the weather. It was rainy in Dallas on the morning of 22 November 1963, but by the time Kennedy arrived the skies had cleared over downtown, and so the bubble top on the convertible in which the president rode had been removed. If the weather had stayed rainy, as it does in Greenfield's alternate history, the top would still have been protecting the car when Oswald fired. When Kennedy survives the nonfatal wound caused by the bullet, which was slightly deflected by the glass top in the alternate history, Greenfield calls it "a matter of the purest chance" (24).

Such plausible divergences not only exist at obviously chancy historical crossroads but also usually involve actual historical agents, either individual or collective. This is especially prominent in alternate histories like Greenfield's, where all the personae are drawn from the historical record. But even in alternate-history novels, which do introduce invented characters, historical personae are sometimes also used to sharpen the contrast

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the presupposed facts. Instead of avoiding extratextual references, as other kinds of novels mostly do, these works pointedly refer to real-world people. Moreover, they use proper names in the way John Stuart Mill says we use them ordinarily: as rigid designators of unique, embodied persons (43–49). Yet the contradictions between the counterfactual events and historical facts should not cause us to view the historical personae in counterfactual narratives as merely fictional. We must instead take their proper names to refer to singular persons or else the hypothetical exercises won't work. For example, in imagining JFK's two-term presidency, Greenfield assumes we are talking about the same person who was actually assassinated in his first term, and he draws many of the conversations and decisions that take place after the date of the assassination from records of Kennedy's actual interactions with his staff and advisors. These techniques help him render JFK's character as consistent across the diverging histories. If we thought of Greenfield's JFK as just another fictional character, we would not accept his premise that the thought experiment is relevant to our history. As the philosopher Bernard Williams explains, the counterfactual narrative gives us "the different life story of the same individual" rather than "the life story of a different individual" (225).

Imagining the same person at the same time in opposite states of existence (alive and dead) is what renders counterfactual and actual accounts *incompossible*, to use the philosophers' word. Each state is possible, but they aren't possible together. The incompossibility alerts us to the kind of fiction we're reading, one that seems to transpire in a hypothetical, alternate world. The notion of incompossibility informs the philosopher Saul Kripke's solution to the problem of how we can entertain hypothetical conjectures that start with clauses such as "If JFK had not been assassinated" when we know that clause is contrary to fact. Describing the semantics of modal verbs, Kripke argues that when we entertain such conjectures, we must mentally construct another possible world, which was identical to our own up until the contradictory event occurred. That alternate world is what historians write of in the conditional mode when assessing analytic counterfactuals, and we might say that counterfactual fictions, even though written in the indicative mood, are understood to participate in the provisionality of the might-have-been world. Some literary theorists have used Kripke's ideas to explain how we process fictionality in general: we read it as pertaining to a possible world different from our own (Rosen). However, most fictions lack the mechanism that Kripke thought triggered alternate world making: incompossibility with particular known facts. Indeed, most novelists invent characters with made-up names in order to be free of factual constraints. Counterfactual narratives, in contrast, flaunt their alternative, possible-world making, emphasizing their difference from fictional norms by their conceptual dependence on the specific facts they contradict. Their possible worlds require repeated factual countering.

The form of incompossibility in these narratives certainly makes us unusually aware that we are reading a fiction, for everything in their alternate historical worlds must be consistent with the original factual reversal. Thus, these fictions create incessant conceptual splitting and doubling. By merely entertaining the contradictory hypothetical, we accept the contingency of the historical fact: before it happened, it might not have happened. And we pair that fact with an unrealized possible alternative. Although we still regard one as historically true and the other as false, the counterfactual exercise frames the fact as one of two kinds of possibility: the factual is the actualized and the fictional is the unactualized possibility. And even if we do not concede that they once had the same degree of likelihood, catching both at the moment of possibility nevertheless

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

gives them a certain ontological parity. By exploring exactly how the facts might have been different, these narratives both replace individual events with plausible counterevents and, simultaneously, preserve the original version. The fictional particulars often derive their meaning by being compared and contrasted with our actuality, providing a way to measure the similarities and differences between the fictional and factual versions. The allusions to counterpart personae and happenings across the ontological divide both create a doppelgänger world that is constantly shadowed by ours and periodically renew our impression of the parallel status of the alternate worlds. The singular nexus events, the points at which the alternate worlds diverge from ours, are therefore not the only moments when incompossibility is established. The narratives continually cultivate it as the basis of our imaginative experience, thereby establishing a semantic system in which the meanings of particulars overtly derive not only from what each persona and event is but also from what it is not.

This peculiar concatenation of facts and counterfacts also affects the distinction I examined earlier between factual particulars and generalizable meanings in fiction. Although set in alternate possible worlds, counterfactual narratives are framed as thought experiments, and their framework seems to heighten the expectation that they will be relevant to our world. As they do in other kinds of fictions, of course, meanings derive not from discrete particulars but from their narrative emplotment within established generic categories, and counterfactual fictions come in all the usual varieties. They rely on conventional forms like comedy, tragedy, irony, utopia, and dystopia. And these forms create unusually reflexive relations to the facts that the narratives both alter and presuppose. Genre gives us a first level of emplotment, but a second level, which strongly affects a work's meaning, comes from the implicit and explicit comparisons with actual history. If the history represented in the fictional narrative is significantly better than the actual history, then the negative aspects of the facts loom larger in our minds. And although the narrative may verge on utopian, as Greenfield's does, the contrast with reality shades it with tragedy. Because he imagines that Kennedy's assassination prevented a peace accord that would have saved millions of Vietnamese and American lives, the disastrous significance of the murder swells far beyond that of an individual's death. Conversely, alternate Civil War fictions in which slavery survives often verge on the dystopian, yet they seem to yield a comic view of history by implying that, dreadful as it was, the war nevertheless ended happily in the emancipation of the slaves. The result was thus worth the loss of life.

Counterfactual fictions like these emphasize the mismatch between genre conventions and the fictions' applicability to our world: Greenfield's utopia encourages us to reflect on the tragic dimensions of the assassination's consequences, and dystopian depictions of slavery's survival make our actual history look progressive. They stress as well the distance between our world and the counterfactual worlds of their narratives. Other counterfactual fictions, though, are set in worlds that should not look like ours but nevertheless do. For example, in narratives depicting a Confederate victory, authors have increasingly avoided blatantly dystopian alternate worlds and have instead imagined the gradual normalization of slavery and the national acceptance of institutionalized racism. Some of these narratives purposely bring the alternate reality as close as possible to our own. Ben H. Winters's *Underground Airlines*, for example, is about a world where American slavery was preserved by the ratification of a thirteenth amendment to the Constitution very much like the one actually passed by Congress in 1861 in a last-ditch effort to save the union through compromise. Although that amend-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ment was left unratified at the time the war broke out, if ratified it would have made it unconstitutional for the federal government to interfere with any state's "domestic institutions," effectively making it impossible to abolish slavery ("Joint Resolution"). Winters imagines that such an amendment was ratified after Lincoln was assassinated in 1861, four years before his actual death, and he depicts a nation in which the Civil War was consequently never fought, leaving the nation divided between free and slave states. Instead of emphasizing the differences between our reality and the alternate one, Winters stresses the similarities: the South, as the region of cheap labor, has economic advantages in an age of free trade, and the nation's official countenancing of racialized slavery makes it easy to discriminate against all black people, even in the North. While retaining the counterfactual premise, the novel portrays the same kinds of white supremacist exploitation, dehumanization, criminalization, and murderous incarceration in the fictional world that we encounter in our own. It thereby shows that the putative victor in that war by no means permanently triumphed over the beliefs and practices of its enemy.

Of course, this is not a new idea. Ever since the end of Reconstruction, the complaint has been made that we inhabit a nation where it often seems as if the South won the Civil War. The counterfactual novel, however, places the actual fact of the Union victory in two kinds of frames—the counterfactual history and the implied actual record of incomplete emancipation. The double frame asks us to ponder the difference between the accuracy of the historical fact and its meaningfulness. We might even say that it asks us to take responsibility for the fact's significance. If it is merely a matter of historical chance that it was the thirteenth amendment of 1865, which freed the slaves, that was ratified instead of the one passed just four years earlier, which would have made their freedom impossible, what will we make of that fact? This novel, like so many other works in the counterfactual mode, insists that while historical facts may be unalterable, their meaning, their truth, their ultimate emplotment is always yet to be determined.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Aristotle's* Poetics. Translated by Gerald F. Else, U of Michigan P, 1967.

Fielding, Henry. *Joseph Andrews*. 1742. Edited by Martin C. Battestin, Wesleyan UP, 1967.

Greenfield, Jeff. *If Kennedy Lived: The First and Second Terms of President John F. Kennedy: An Alternate History*. Penguin Books, 2013.

"Joint Resolution to Amend the Constitution of the United States." 2 Mar. 1861. *United States Statutes at Large*, vol. 12, Little, Brown, 1863, p. 251.

Kripke, Saul. *Naming and Necessity*. Blackwell Publishing, 1981.

McKeon, Michael. *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1987.

Mill, John Stuart. *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*. 1843. John W. Parker, 1882.

Rosen, Ruth. *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*. Cambridge UP, 1994.

Roth, Philip. *The Plot against America*. Vintage Books, 2004.

Shapiro, Barbara. *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720*. Cornell UP, 2000.

Sidney, Philip. "The Defense of Poetry." 1579. *Complete Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, edited by Albert Feuillerat, vol. 3, Cambridge UP, 1962, pp. 11–88.

Williams, Bernard. "Resenting One's Own Experience." *"Making Sense of Humanity" and Other Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge UP, 1995, pp. 224–32.

Winters, Ben H. *The Underground Airlines*. Little, Brown, 2016.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1129 Published online by Cambridge University Press