

# Alternate History and the Classical Past: The Uchronic Impulse



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**Abstract:** Uchrony, the rewriting of history as it might have been (also known as “alternate history” or, somewhat abusively, “counter-factual history”), has grown increasingly popular during the course of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with diverse professional and nonprofessional authors playing with world’s events to rewrite them in line with their fantasy writing. The ancient world has not been forgotten in those efforts, and a wide range of productions of diverse scope have altered the historical events of Ancient Egypt, Hebraic history, ancient China, India or Persia, as well as, of course, the Greek, Hellenistic and Roman periods. This article also attempts to demonstrate how rationalism and empiricism, as developed since Descartes, Bacon and Hume, impact our perception of the world in this genre of popular fiction. The deep internalization of those philosophical concepts by our Western societies have become such that most authors and readers do not even think about them when trying to depict the thoughts and actions of people not exposed to them.

**Keywords:** uchronia (alternate history), classical antiquity, rationalism, empiricism, historical plausibility

## Introducing Uchronia

Herodotus asked himself what would have happened to Greece had the Hellenes not overcome the Persian onslaught at Salamis (Herodotus, *History*, VII, 139). Livy imagined the fight that would have taken place had Alexander, surviving Babylon, turned against Rome (Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, IX, 17-19). Since then, many have played with the flow of time, modifying it in a myriad of ways, either as a game, a way to take revenge for the fate given to them or their ancestor by History, for nationalistic reasons, for the philosophical seduction of the exercise or for its intellectual quality (see Gallagher, 2018). Called Alternate History (AH) in English, and Uchronie in French, we speak here of this “unknown land, next to ours or outside of the flow of time, discov-

ered by the philosopher Renouvier and where are relegated, like old moons, events that might have happened but didn’t” (Messac, 1934: 658).

Uchronia is born from a point of divergence with our reality, the PoD, also called sometimes the Nexus point (Hellekson, 2001: 5). This PoD can be associated with either a human intervention or a natural factor which the uchronia takes as a point of departure, creating a new narrative. Thus Caesar’s not going to the Senate on the Ides of March, Marcus Aurelius’ not dying from sickness on the frontlines, the great Justinian plague being less severe are all PoDs playing on very different factors that lead to uchronic texts. Some of those PoDs have been used in counterfactual history (G. Traiana’s *Carrhes* comes to mind), or in amateur writings but not, as far as I know, in



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published novels (Renouvier's PoD in fact is not Marcus Aurelius' survival of sickness but his having a much more aggressive policy during his Danubian campaigns, which prevents the Germanic migrations our history has known).

Purists of the genre will exclude time travel and its sometimes paradoxical consequences, and will make a clear distinction with counterfactual history. In the present article I will, however, look at the reception of Classical history in all of its uchronic avatars taken in the broadest meaning, including time travel, in order to make both comparisons of details and larger conclusions. My goal is to give a general overview of the situation and explore how the depiction of the ancient world in alternate history may differ from that found in more usual productions such as traditional historical novels or movies.

Authors may introduce the PoD in many different ways, with them being sometimes described early on in the novel or with its disclosure being more discreet, as the author plays with the readers forcing them to discover the nature of the historical change. Thus in Harry Turtledove's *The Daimon* (2002) we find no explicit mention of the PoD; it falls to the reader to discover that the presence of Socrates in Sicily with Alcibiades<sup>1</sup> is the

divergence making Alcibiades decide to stay on the island, conquer Syracuse and come back home in triumph as a proof of his innocence in the Hermes sacrilege. The PoD may also, sometimes, have no direct relationship with the intrigue. This second approach is illustrated by Turtledove's collection of short stories *Agent of Byzantium* (1987) in which the PoD is the survival of a stronger Byzantium thanks to a milder Justinianic plague,<sup>2</sup> the plots of the short novels being various investigations by a 14<sup>th</sup> century special agent, Basil Argyros. In this case, information about the PoD is disseminated throughout the collection, and it is once more the reader that must piece it together from the various clues left by the author. In those novels, Turtledove plays with his readers, throwing some jokes at them, such as the constant references to St Muhammad, the patron saint of the investigator. Those jokes have two roles, one as elements that emphasize the feeling of difference with our reality, another as part of building complicity between reader and writer, which constitute what Henriette calls "le clin d'oeil au lecteur" (2003: 41).

The authors of alternate history seem to come from various backgrounds, although most are men<sup>3</sup> of European or

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<sup>1</sup> Alcibiades (450 - 404 BCE), Athenian general and politician, educated by his uncle Pericles and follower of Socrates. He pushed Athens to launch in 416 BCE an expedition against Sicily of which he was granted command before political intrigue led to his recall home, which ultimately led to the expedition's destruction. Alcibiades would then spend a decade helping the Spartans, the Persians and the Athenians until his death in exile a few months after the final defeat of Athens by Sparta. He appears in a number of ancient texts by, among others, Thucydides, Plato,

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Xenophon or Plutarch, and in a number of later works of art and letters

<sup>2</sup> The plague of Justinian was the first recorded plague caused in Europe and the Mediterranean area by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which also caused later the Black Death. It ravaged the Eastern Roman Empire between 541 and 549 AD, killing millions, and the Eastern Roman Empire's emperor Justinian himself caught it in 542 (although he did survive).

<sup>3</sup> There are very few women in this field, especially in the English-speaking world. The only exception I can think of is the participa-



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North-American origin, maybe because of the West's particular relationship with the past. Amongst the best-known authors we find trained historians: Eric Flint, author of, amongst others, *1632* (a collaborative series set in the 17<sup>th</sup> century), pursued formal training in history (even starting a PhD on early colonial South African history, before his political activism led him to leave Academia, see Flint, 2012), as did Harry Turtledove, who has a PhD in Byzantine history, which explains the rare depth to some of his texts such as the Basil Argyros stories. However it appears most authors did not pursue any formal training in the discipline, which may help explain in part why some points of divergence come more often to the fore. While trained historians may play with more obscure periods or historical characters those without such training will stick mostly to the best-known historical characters. Incidentally, Turtledove's Basil Argyros collection of short stories, *Agent of Byzantium*, was introduced by Isaac Asimov, a man also passionate about History. Most texts classified under the "alternate history" header are indeed associated with science-fiction, even when they do not imply time-travelling. This categorization might explain why the genre was not really taken seriously by professional historians, at least not until the 1990s and the popularization of formal counterfactual history by Niall Ferguson in his volume *Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (1999) (see Kreisler,

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tion of a number of women in Eric Flint's *1632* collaborative series (Virginia DeMarce, Paula Goodlet, Marilyn Kosmatka). Also, fantasy author Judith Tarr's work with Harry Turtledove on *Household Gods*, although this (very good) novel is more a time travel experience (and possibly in many ways a so-called 'self-insert' type of time travel) than an alternate history.

2003). Unlike fiction, counterfactual history, which is conceived as a scientific approach, was defined by Jeremy Black and Donald MacRaild as "the idea of conjecturing on what did not happen, or what might have happened, in order to understand what did happen" (2007: 125). The emphasis is laid on the study of the "true" timeline, playing with its parameters to see what changes this would cause, as a chemist playing with his compounds would do in his lab. The divergence is thus used to put into light the role of the parameter in our history. In contrast, the literary uchrony/alternate history puts the emphasis on the world that appears after this change of parametre.

### Classics in Alternate History and Alternate Realia<sup>4</sup>

There is probably no need to evoke here the long shadow of the ancient world on later arts and literature, names such as those of Joachim Du Bellay, William Shakespeare, Jean Racine, Marivaux or Alexandre Dumas being but a few examples of artists with a great interest in it for the centuries following its rediscovery in the early Renaissance. Yet it is useful to look in some depth at the various artistic productions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to define some of the main characteristics of the representation of the ancient world in order to compare them with the representations found in uchronia. To achieve this, we'll use Claude Aziza's categories from his book *Guide de l'Antiquité Imaginaire* (2008).

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<sup>4</sup> Realia is the technical term used in archeology and (ancient) History to describe daily life artefacts and realities (in opposition to religious or architectural elements for instance).



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Before examining the way the classical past is explored it might be good to examine the importance of the phenomenon. In order to do so I shall use Robert B. Schmunk's restrictive bibliography of the genre, which lists some 247 titles with PoD's situated between 6000 BCE and 700 CE (Schmunk, 1991-2020):

7<sup>th</sup> century BC and before, 49  
6<sup>th</sup> century BC, 2  
5<sup>th</sup> century BC, 10  
4<sup>th</sup> century BC, 13  
3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, 17  
2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, 4  
1<sup>st</sup> century BC, 32  
1<sup>st</sup> century AD, 34  
2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, 6  
3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, 0  
4<sup>th</sup> century AD, 28  
5<sup>th</sup> century AD, 24  
6<sup>th</sup> century AD, 12  
7<sup>th</sup> century AD, 15

The lack of titles with a nexus set in the third century AD is as obvious as it is surprising: the period between the fall of the Han dynasty in China and the so-called crisis of the Roman Empire, offers many potential points of divergence that have not been exploited. An exception, posterior to this initial research, would be the 2015 Hesperian trilogy by Alan Smale (*Clash of Eagle*, 2015; *Eagle in Exile*, 2016; *Eagle and Empire*, 2017), which shows a Roman attempt to conquer America. Similarly, the second century BC is not a very productive era, coming after the second Punic War and Hannibal, despite being a period when, for instance, Rome could have failed in its conquest of Greece. One should also remember that the date of the PoD is not always the period during which the novel takes place, which explains the apparent overrepresentation of very early PoDs in this

list. One of the most extreme, pre-historic, examples is, of course, Ray Bradbury's novel *A Sound of Thunder* (1953) in which the crushing of a butterfly in the age of dinosaurs causes changes in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

This focus on some periods rather than others is, as I have mentioned, probably due in part with the lack of familiarity of many authors with the historical past: they just create their story around what they learned in school or in some documentary which inflamed their imagination and fed their creativity. Another reason, though, might be the need for the author to catch the reader's attention, which is easier to do when speaking of a period or events of which the reader has already heard of. This might also be one of the reasons most authors play with PoD's set in Western history, given that they mostly write for Western audiences.

Given what we have already noted about the authors of the genre it will surprise no one to discover that the Ancient world is often drawn with large, caricatural strokes, as happens in the movies, privileging pompous representations to descriptions of everyday life, and focusing on the magnificent and the huge, thus earning the pejorative nickname "antiquité colossale" in Aziza's categorizations (2008: 83). Those texts and movies often show us market scenes, the life of the masters of palaces and villas, sumptuous banquets given in the richest halls deep in the forests of Germany, in the cities of Phénicia or in the Eastern kingdoms but not more mundane scenes. These more spectacular images are also present in uchronia, sometimes giving the author opportunities to better root their alternate world in our mental representations of the time, such as when time-travelers establish convenient local contacts able to help them in markets.



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Various other “images d’Epinal,” other topoi, are often found in both classical historical novels and, of course, their alternate versions. Hagia Sophia in Constantinople is one of those elements always mentioned in relation to Byzantium, even in stories set at a time when it was not built yet (for example as a dream by one of the characters); chariot races come next in the list of common topoi on the Ancient city. Another familiar picture is that of sheep grazing on the abandoned Rome of alternate history, as happens in *Hannibal’s Children* by John Maddox Roberts (2002), in which the Romans return to the seven hills after a century-long exile caused by their defeat by Hannibal. This is of course a direct reference to Renaissance descriptions of the sorry state of the Forum Romanum in their time and one needs only turn to paintings of Piranesi or Pannini to visualize the described scenes.

### The Place of the Great Men of History

Seeing the cliched use of topoi, one might expect to see a comparatively massive use of famous Great Men. Yet one would be disappointed because they do not appear as often as one would expect despite the fact that their lives provide obvious PoD. In fact, leaving Jesus aside, the Great Men are mostly present to provide a background to help the readers find their way in the chronology. Yet here is one of the points where professional authors and amateurs self-publishing online diverge in their approaches, as the latter are much more open to the idea of directly using famous men of the past for their own devices, a true difference between what is available in the bookshops on one side and, for example, the [alternatohistory.com](http://alternatohistory.com) website on the other. This situa-

tion may be explained in various ways. Firstly, the use of known historical figures places a certain number of constraints on the writer, who must respect, if not the historical character, at least his modern representation. This is, in many ways, comparable to the issues one sees in fan fiction around the use of characters and the respect of the canon of the content on which the fan fiction story is based (see for instance Peason, 2014). The relative prominence of famous figures in amateur short stories and novels, such as Julius Caesar<sup>5</sup> or Belisarius, is on the other hand linked to both the level of knowledge of the ancient world by the authors or their wish to build upon the popularity of their characters amongst the potential readership.

Another relevant issue is also the changes inflicted by the PoD on historical characters. According to the butterfly effect, once something changes then everything will: people will not marry the same persons, or if they do, not at the exact same time, eggs will not fertilize at the exact same time with the exact same gametes... Characters will of course be affected by those small differences: sickness might be avoided, but others might be contracted, death will happen at another time, choices will not be the same. Amateurs, though, sometimes forget this or write characters who might have a slightly different name but are, in fact, pale copies of the historical characters. One might thus say that the famous people act as lighthouses in a sea of darkness, with

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<sup>5</sup> For an example published by a professional writer see Friesner’s *Child of the Eagle. A Myth of Rome on Julius Caesar* (1996). One of the most extreme professional examples is the six-volume *Belisarius* series by Eric Flint and David Drake, published between 1998 and 2006.



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the amateur staying closer to the light while the professional usually prefers the freedom offered by the very obscurity the amateur flees, as long as he can bring his reader along thanks to some element allowing a link with what the reader already knows.

A similar trend is visible in a part of the contemporary Anglo-American production of Greek and Roman adventure historical novels: *Vespasian* and the year of the four emperors have a remarkable popularity, notably with the current series by Robert Fabbri,<sup>6</sup> an amateur in terms of the Ancient world, while Oxford professor Harry Sidebottom, a specialist of Roman military history, chose the obscure 3<sup>rd</sup> century barbarian usurper Ballista, only known from the *Historia Augusta*, for his own series of novels, before expanding his fictional universe to the previous decades and the revolt of the Gordiani.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Christian Cameron, author of various novels set in Classical and early Hellenistic Greece, underwent formal education in Ancient History after his initial career in the US Navy, and prefers characters walking alongside the great men rather than speaking about the great men themselves,<sup>8</sup> contrary to Colleen McCullough's famous *Masters of Rome* series (1990-2007, seven novels), which focuses on the great men of the last century of the Roman Republic. This topic

of how authors choose historical characters for their stories falls outside of the scope of the present article but might be worth further enquiries.

### Contemporary Politics Set in Yester-years

Coming back to uchronic texts, we may note that they are often not simple shows destined to provide entertainment with impressive period images such as those we just discussed, but part of a more militant brand of novels set in the Ancient world, something Aziza also call the "pre-text" kind of texts (2008: 113). In those stories the Classical world is mostly a set in which to address contemporary issues, such as in the classic *Quo Vadis?* (1895) by Henryk Sienkiewicz, which actually deals with the political situation of Poland in the 1890s rather than in the Ancient world. Likewise, the travel novels by Poul Anderson or Robert Silverberg's *Up the Line* (1969) must be read in the context of the post-May 1968 and Woodstock 1969 atmosphere, especially regarding sexuality: the character's remarks on the "natives'" customs throughout such stories are thus less a comment on the Ancients' morality, and more a comment on their own time. Critic Alvaro Zinos-Amaro wrote that *Up the Line*, "especially in its early chapters, is so drenched in the lingo and culture—meaning, specifically, the drugs and sex—of the late sixties that it may almost seem like a hippie parody à la Austin Powers: quite shagadelic" (2011).

A theme particularly present in those alternate histories set in the Ancient world is religion and particularly the three main monotheistic religions, what Aziza calls the "messianic" stories (2008: 47). Events of the Old Testament, those of

<sup>6</sup> Robert Fabbri, *Vespasian* series, ongoing since 2011, seven novels and three short stories at the time of writing this article.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Sidebottom, *Warrior of Rome* and *Throne of the Caesar* series, ongoing since 2008, nine novels and two short stories at the time of writing.

<sup>8</sup> Christian Cameron, *Tyrant* series, six volumes published between 2008 and 2014, and *The Long War* series, five published volumes and one new announced at the time of writing.



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the life of Jesus or of the martyrs of his cult, and those related to the prophet of Islam make the core of those novels, although to be fair the later are less common.<sup>9</sup> Precisely, one of the first uchronies formally recorded is the one that gave its name to the genre, written by the French philosopher Charles Renouvier under the title *Uchronie, Utopie dans l'histoire* (1876). Its subject was a detailed and somewhat tedious exploration of a Roman world in which a changed Antonine dynasty takes anti-Christian measures, pushing the followers of this religion far to the East. This goal of changing the course of history by eliminating the great monotheism would become a frequent theme. Another such example is *Hands Off* by Edward Everett Hale (1881), a philosophical tale describing how the failure of Joseph, son of Jacob, to become an Egyptian slave prevents him from saving his masters in their fight against the Cananean, leading to a period of darkness from which neither the Jewish faith nor the Greek and Roman civilizations are allowed to flourish, depriving mankind of the word of Jesus. Another adaptation of the Jewish history is, of course, the novel *Roma Aeterna* by Silverberg (2003). In it Moses's failing to part the Red Sea means that the Jewish faith remains an insignificant cult followed by some desert dwellers of the Sinai while Rome grows along a longer and more glorious road because it has no Jewish rebellions to crush and Christianity does not, of course, appear in order to disrupt the workings of the empire. At-

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<sup>9</sup> However since 2014 came a number of titles. Beside *Soumission* by Michel Houellebecq (2015) we may note *Through Darkest Europe* by Harry Turtledove (2018) and *Empire of Lies* by Raymond Khoury (2019), all of which have more medieval PoDs and take place in the contemporary era.

tempts to change the course of Christianity are also numerous, be it New Testament events revisited, for example, to save the Christ from Golgotha or different decisions by the Roman power relative to the Jews and Christians or a longer and more fruitful life of Julian the Apostate as in John M. Ford's 1983 *The Dragon Waiting*.

Some texts do also play with the conditions of the birth of Islam, as does for instance a very short text published online on [Alternatohistory.com](http://Alternatohistory.com) under the title "A Report to the Emperor" (Major Major, 2010). In it an officer reports on a desert patrol in Arabia during which he captured and executed a caravan raider and his companions in a routine police intervention. Further on the reader learns that the man, called Mouamad, was also a heretic and was thus submitted to the most severe sentence. The text concludes with a note by a second hand ordering a punishment for the officer who used the first singular pronoun instead of the third... Yet sometimes the wheel of time turns in the other direction, such as in the novel *Roma Islamica* (Harbour, 2012). In this text, Constantinople falls to a combined sea and land attack in 715 AD, with a rapid Islamisation of Europe following. A few years later, a certain Charlemagne becomes the champion of the new religion...

While those examples play with the condition of evolution of the three main religions, we do also find texts which change the world's history by reinforcing other cults such as Mithraism or Manichaeism, those becoming under various circumstances the dominant faiths of the Roman Empire. Lastly for these kinds of novels, I will mention texts that concentrate on the personality of Jesus and especially his Passion. Those usually either change the circumstances under which he



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was killed (be it the method of his death or his escaping this fate altogether), or replace him on the cross with another character, often a time traveler that does not, because of his love for him, want the Christ to suffer the gruesome crucifixion. Such is the plot of Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*, published in 1969.

### **Faith in Technology for a Better World**

Religion, while indeed a topic often mentioned, is far from being the only or the most interesting topic examined by uchronia. The theme of the technological evolution of civilizations is also often at the heart of the texts. As a question to be treated in an Ancient context they are of course rather unique to the genre, and they do not appear in Aziza's classification although he is well-aware of their existence.

Most of these novels involve time traveling, displacing an individual from a more advanced period into the past, such as we see in Lyon Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* (1941), in which an archeologist walking the streets of Mussolini's Rome finds himself unexpectedly thrown back to the city of the Gothic era and about to be besieged by Belisarius.

The traveler in this kind of novels may either succeed in his endeavor to improve the past, prospering in it, as does the character of Martin Padway in *Lest Darkness Fall*, or to the contrary fail utterly to adapt to his new surroundings. Such is the case in Poul Anderson's short novel *The Man Who Came Early* (1956), a direct response to *Lest Darkness Fall*, in which a GI finds himself thrown into the Iceland of the ancient sagas where his knowledge of modern man deprives him of any skill useful to his survival. Compar-

ing those two novels is very interesting because they show two different ways to conceive the relationship between natives and time travelers. While both authors do find ways to circumvent the difficulty of understanding the language of the ancients, they do not take into account the question of the mentality of the different eras, as we will see.

In 1959, the philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote a refutation of the Marxist vision of technological evolution before proceeding to give his own nearly mechanical and providential vision of such development, which is to him mostly a set succession of events. "Marx," Russell wrote, "thinks that discoveries and inventions are made when the economic situation calls for them. This, however, is a quite unhistorical view. Why was there practically no experimental science from the time of Archimedes to the time of Leonardo? For six centuries after Archimedes the economic conditions were such as should have made scientific work easy. It was the growth of science after the Renaissance that led to modern industry". In Russell's view, "This intellectual causation of economic processes is not adequately recognized by Marx. History can be viewed in many ways, and many general formulae can be invented which cover enough of the ground to seem adequate if the facts are carefully selected." This leads him to "suggest, without undue solemnity, the following alternative theory of the causation of the Industrial Revolution: industrialism is due to modern science, modern science is due to Galileo, Galileo is due to Copernicus, Copernicus is due to the Renaissance, the Renaissance is due to the fall of Constantinople, the fall of Constantinople is due to the migration of the Turks, the migration of the Turks is due to the desiccation of Central Asia. Therefore the fundamental





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study in searching for historical causes is hydrography” (Russell, 1959: 295).

The lure of accelerating technological evolution or sending it onto another path is a theme we mostly see in two periods: the Ancient world, especially from the Hellenistic period onward, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s Industrial Revolution, often under the guise of the Steampunk genre. Most often the texts do adopt a positive faith in technology, a doxa inherited from Auguste Comte’s positivism which resonates oddly in our time when skepticism and indifference or, even, mistrust and hostility toward technology seem to win territory. Some uchronic texts do not call upon external interventions to accelerate the process of science. Be it the early discovery of stirrups, such as in the novel *Cato’s Cavalry* (Jones, 2013),<sup>10</sup> in which the Britanno-Romans discover them in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and begin a reconquest of their island and then of the Roman Empire, or be it more advanced and Jules-Verne’s like developments such as in John Maddox Roberts’ *Hannibal’s Children* (2003). In this novel, Syracuse is besieged not by the Romans of Marcellus, as his nation has been already vanquished and exiled north of the Alps, but by the Carthaginians. This change allows Archimedes to survive and flee to the Great Library of Alexandria where he creates a new, more mechanically-oriented school of applied philosophy that will give birth to more and more complex mechanisms for both peace and war.

Most often those stories accelerating the course of science do call upon the providential man, the genius, the man who either came with knowledge or had the big idea: the inventor becomes the

important element, not the technology itself. The goal of the authors might be to use a specific technology, sometimes on the more or less mistaken assumption that the technology was feasible, but the story (or the story arc) will be about bringing the technology into being in the alternate reality being described. This of course is probably the element that connects alternate history the most firmly to classic science fiction.

### Proper Alternate History, an Unachievable Goal ?

Speaking of the progress, scientific or otherwise, of civilizations brings us back to what will be the last part of this article: the mindset of the ancients against that of the moderns, and how the novels trying to reinvent the past take this difference into account. Our society has known an extraordinary evolution thanks to the rational philosophical developments made since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, changing the way we think. While one might argue that Aristotle had already described a form of empiricism, the influences of the rationalism of Descartes and of the empiricism of Bacon or Hume upon the way we see, experience and think the world cannot be underestimated. The later arrival of psychology, language philosophy, communication theories and the postmodern outlook have completely infused our culture on every level, and our way of being, whether we are aware of it from our education or simply applying the lessons of those advances by unconscious mimesis. Not only the different mindset but also language may be a problem in time-travel alternate History novels. Some authors have undoubtedly missed the issue, while others may simply have decided to ignore it, probably for simplicity’s sake and to

<sup>10</sup> Initially a text published on [www.alternatehistory.com](http://www.alternatehistory.com) before being turned into a book.



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concentrate on their stories instead of what they might consider a distraction from their main message.

On the other hand, there is actually at least one text touching on the issue, once more by the precursor Lyon Sprague de Camp. In his short story “Aristotle and the Gun” (1958), he describes how the attempts by a time traveler to accelerate the development of science by influencing Aristotle dramatically backfires. The traveler, assuming the guise of an Indian, mistakenly convinces Aristotle that India is far more advanced and that there is no point in pursuing research, especially as it requires dirtying one’s hands like a workman, so unlike the proper intellectual work that philosophy is supposed to be. The consequence is that when the traveler goes back to his time he discovers a completely different and, to his surprise, most backward world, finding a Viking, medieval territory in the place where his very advanced USA should have been. This text is one of the few that underlines the difference between mentalities of the modern and the Ancients. The traveler’s assumptions are proven to be completely wrong, and while this is a deliberate choice by De Camp, it should in fact be a standard on which we should evaluate every text, both in traditional historical novels and alternate histories.

Ethnography and anthropology could serve as guides for authors of the genre, as they sometimes were for science-fiction authors, because of course the historical and alternate history novels are the science-fiction of the past, the place we project so many of our own interrogations. Yet while his topic would require further studies, it would however go further than the goals of the present article. One could say that we are faced with an issue where authors did not (or would not?) recognize the otherness of those who lived centuries

ago. Might it be because those authors think that the people who gave us so much must have been so close to us so as to not make a difference? Or is it simply, as I would tend to believe, because they want to facilitate readers’ identification with the story, and thus their enjoyability of the texts without introducing overly complex notions?

### Conclusion

This discussion of Alternate History as seen through the lens of the use of the Ancient world as background is of course a basic approach to the topic, which would require many new studies to be fully understood. Yet it also allows us to reach some first conclusions about the genre and its links to the Ancient world. While the altered antiquity of uchronies and time travel do share a certain amount of characteristics with historical novels, on both the formal and general content, they do have some particularities that set them apart in terms of their nature when one looks in more detail at the themes explored.

The first, and most important element that distinguishes historical fiction and uchronies is the fact that the later actually changes History as we know it. This is fundamental to the genre, and is probably what attracts readers and writers in the first place. Secondly the shared use of past settings by both historical fictions and alternate histories does confront them with similar issues, but alternate history has further challenges which authors might be loath to confront directly but are to be taken into account to fully appreciate the texts. Alternate histories must remain credible both in the changes introduced in the known history and in the consequences explored. This is espe-



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cially true when depictions of interactions between time travelers and era natives are concerned. The philosophical aspects of those time games are not the least of those differences, yet only the best authors of the genre do actually confront those issues, in a way that is similar to the distinction between good historical fiction, which does not try to have historical characters act in the way our current society expects them to, and bad historical fictions that simply put people which are psychologically of our era in the past.

The fact that authors of uchronies do not seem to take into account the constraints that those philosophical aspects should put upon them should probably be also read as a testimony to the depth of the internalization by both authors and readers of the numerous concepts relating to our perception of the world and of human relations born of the last few centuries of philosophical thinking. And that is probably one of the main contributions of alternate history to our society.

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