Historiography as Fiction, Fiction as History: An Overview of the Use of Historiographical Discourse to Narrate Possible Futures since the Nineteenth Century[1]

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Abstract: The double dimension of historiographical writing—documentary and artistic—has been virtually overshadowed by the emphasis on the scientific nature of the discipline and its subsequent exclusion from the literary canon from the nineteenth century onwards. Fictional or imaginary history emerged at that time as a way to safeguard the literariness of history as a formal genre, using the rhetorical discourse of historiography to achieve an effect of historicity in texts that often had a satirical or cautionary intent. Most of these convey primarily considerations about the evolution of humanity and its history, as seen from a future perspective. In this kind of historiography, which we shall refer to as imaginary or anticipatory history, future historians addressing their contemporary readership narrate their past history, which, for us, is the future. By eschewing the narrative form of the novel and adopting instead that of historiography, these writers also broaden the temporality of historical consciousness: future events become as real as any in the past and can be examined following the historical method, with their fictionality concealed under the cloak of factual discourse. Moreover, the historical laws posited by the authors are shown in action in the future as well. Fictional historiography is not only literature, but also anticipatory history. Examples of this genre are relatively abundant in modern literatures. As literary products, most of them follow a similar writing method: the one prevalent in the historiography of the age in which they were produced. As historical reflections, they usually have widely different approaches to the future course of humankind and the forces that propel it through historical time, from past to future.

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Introduction

For millennia, historiography has been also a literary genre with its own set of discursive features. These discursive features were applied as a matter of course to accounts of real events or deeds, or at least documented as if they were. Texts, such as the famous ones by Plato about Atlantis, however, suggest that the rhetorical discourse of historiography, consecrated a short time before by Herodotus, could also be applied to matters of fantasy. Plato used the documentary nature of historical writing to add an extra degree of verisimilitude, both to the imaginary island being evoked and to the events that supposedly took place there. The success of Plato's choice of rhetoric can easily be demonstrated by simply recalling the thousands of volumes that have been devoted to locating the whereabouts of Atlantis, as if it were a real, rather than a fictional location. Plato's history of Atlantis is a masterly combination of fantasy content and historiographical discourse that created a specific literary genre which we could refer to as 'fictional history' or, following Witold Ostrowski, 'imaginary history.' Ostrowski was, we believe, the first to point out the existence of this genre, defining it as follows: "imaginary history is a kind of fiction whose form and method of presentation belong to historiography, but where contents are a figment of the imagination" (1960: 27). This scholar was probably also the first to point out that imaginary history was opening up a new space for historiography: the future.

There are also imaginary histories of equally imaginary territories, written with all the characteristics of historiographical writing. Some examples include *La gloire de l'empire* (*The Glory of the Empire*, 1971) by Jean d'Ormesson, as well as counterfactual histories that narrate alternate developments of our world, such as Louis Geoffroy's *Napoléon et la conquête du monde. 1812 à 1832. Histoire de la monarchie universelle* (*Napoleon and the Conquest of the World, 1812-1832: A Fictional History*, 1836). In modern times, however, the historiography of the future has been most often cultivated, as this overview of the genre from the nineteenth century to the present day will demonstrate.

This history of imaginary history is necessarily preceded by a description of those discursive characteristics of the genre that distinguish it from other types of fictional narrative. The aim is to demonstrate that fictional, or imaginary, history is not a type of novel, but a historiographical genre, at least from a rhetorical and literary perspective. It is at the same time a genre of history and not of the novel, because it has been used and can be used by historians as a means of advancing hypotheses about the course of human history from the past into the future. In fictional history, the future is imagined using historical reasoning and the working methods of the scientific study of History. Not only is the writing in this genre historiographical, so too is the attitude of the writer/historian.

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1. Fictional history: a theoretical description

Until the nineteenth century, there was no particularly obvious reason for historiography to make a literary distinction between a historical account and a fictitious story: they were two narrative modes with different purposes. The first set out to convey information about events that were supposed to have actually taken place; the second was a product of the imagination. Nevertheless, the two modes were subject to certain rhetorical procedures that were, to a large extent, shared, since stylistic ornamentation played a fundamental role in both types of discourse. With the advent of *scientific* historiography in the nineteenth century, and especially the triumph of positivism, this scenario underwent increasingly radical change. The study of History began to be based on the exhaustive investigation of documentary sources before an account that corresponded as far as possible to the reality of the past could be constructed, and whose trustworthiness was founded on the principle of falsifiability. Its dependence on demonstrable (and expandable) documentation was the opposite of the intrinsically arbitrary fictitious utterances of which tales and novels are composed. In history, meanwhile, stylistic ornamentation gradually gave way to an obsession with verifiability. The two main results of this were, on the one hand, the invasive presence of documents in the body of the text, and on the other, a widespread distrust of rhetorical literariness in historiographical prose.

The practical consequence of this phenomenon was that historiography withdrew from the literary universe, so that it ceased to be a genre comparable to the novel or drama as it had been since Antiquity. The poetic function—understood as the result of a series of rhetorical procedures designed to draw attention to the linguistic form of a text and provide aesthetic support regardless of content—has not disappeared in many modern historians, some of whom can be regarded as paragons of style; in this connection, one has only to think of Winston Churchill, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his historiographical work. Even so, it can hardly be disputed that contemporary historiography rarely receives attention as a literary object.

In the area of contemporary historical theory, however, the similarities between fictional and historical narrative are of critical importance. This would be the case of certain postmodern theorists of historiography, for example, for whom the boundaries between the two types of narrative are more blurred, although it should also be mentioned that they do not usually challenge the fact that the historian is not free. Staley, for instance, points out that “postmodernist literary theory confirmed what he had long believed about history writing: that history is a story, and the historian is a type of storyteller” (2002: 82). He introduced a fundamental caveat, however:

> It is true that both scenario-building and history are forms of storytelling. But while historians are indeed storytellers, we write particular types of disciplined stories. Unlike fiction writers who enjoy many more degrees of narrative freedom, historians must adhere to specific methods that limit the types of stories we are permitted to write. (82)

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The historian continues to pay due respect to documentary truth manifested in markers of historicity that guide the reader and indicate that this is not an imaginary recreation or a historical novel:

> Explanations about the conditions of the research, quotations and paratexts (notes, bibliography, and so on) indicate that the narration is not sufficient in itself, not self-referential and bear witness to the intention to be subject to inspection.[1]

This search for the documented truth of the past refutes the skeptical relativism of those, particularly in the field of literary studies and semiotics, who see it as a linguistic construction and hence as artificial as any other type of story. These scholars regard markers of historicity as representing a vain attempt at scientific semiosis. For them, history would be:

> a type of discourse, the main function of whose imposing apparatus (references, sources, bibliography, iconic documents) is, perhaps, to persuade us of the scientific procedure, rather than to support a rigorous demonstration that would go beyond mere verisimilitude.[2]

From a textualist point of view, therefore, the approach to historiography of the semiologists is quite the opposite of the common conviction among historians that the only function of their writing is to act as a rhetorical vehicle for the presentation of real facts and events, a presentation that seeks to maintain a direct, objective relationship with its object of reference, even if, as far as the actual writing is concerned, the expository style varies from historian to historian. However, neither semiologists nor historians have so far considered the large number of works of imaginary history, an analysis of which would clearly demonstrate that their historiographical form of discourse (their *textuality*) is irrelevant for asserting or rejecting their historical truth, which should be judged using criteria other than rhetorical ones. For literary critics, it is immaterial whether what is recounted in the story (or imaginary history for that matter[3]) refers to something that has a basis in the real world, because they evaluate the text from a completely different perspective from the historian, who assesses its veracity or accuracy, in other words, whether there is a faithful

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[1] "explications sur les conditions de la recherche, citations, paratexte (notes, bibliographie, etc.). Elles indiquent que la narration ne se suffit à elle-même, qu'elle n'est pas autoréférentielle et elles attestent l'intention de se soumettre à un contrôle" (Leduc, 1999: 182). All translations are by the author.

[2] "un genre de discours dont l'imposant appareil (références, sources, bibliographie, documents iconiques) a peut-être pour fonction principale de nous persuader de la démarche scientifique plutôt que d'étayer une démonstration rigoureuse qui irait au-delà de la seule vraisemblance" (Francoeur, 1988-1989: 189).

[3] In order to underline our point regarding the relationship between "story" and "history" in this survey of imaginary/fictional history, "history" will be used throughout instead of "story" whenever this particular genre is referred to, while "story" will designate any kind of fiction written in the standard form of novelistic discourse. Here any text written in historiographical discourse is "history," including cases where the content is not factual, as is the case in anticipatory historiography.

correspondence between what is written and a preexisting objective referent. In imaginary history, the criterion of verifiability applied by the historian is suspended, simply because it is a literary genre with a historiographical form, not historiography trying to pass off falsehoods as historical truths:

> What we are calling fictional, or imaginary history is not untruthful or misleading, because its readers know (or ought to know) that it is not possible to find real-world referents for counterfactual history, histories about the future, that feature non-human species or imaginary lands, or are reconstructed from documents that do not exist.[4]

The processes set forth in fictional histories are apprehended as inherently imaginary, even when the author multiplies the markers of truthfulness. Fictional history exploits the linguistic markers of historicity that are essential in all historiographical writing. Even opponents of *textualist* theories like Pomian assert that all history writing has to:

> bear the distinctive markers of historicity: verbal expressions, graphic or iconic signs that refer to the evidence for the statements made in the text in a way that enables the readers to trace them … But there are also internal markers of historicity in the language: the historian needs a special rhetoric.[5]

It is precisely this rhetoric that enables fictional history to create the illusion that the alleged source documents really exist and that the work has been reconstructed from them. Unlike false historiography, the fully imaginary content of the text lets the reader know that this is a work of fiction, without the need to move outside the textual space to check the veracity of the mock-documentary sources adduced. Nevertheless, this fiction is historiographical and *not* novelistic. The fictional historian is not bound by the obligation to manipulate a set of individualized characters, as is the case in the novel. Fictional history does not present private individual destinies. Its object is collective: humankind in its entirety or, at the very least, a whole society, which evolves in the invented scenario as if it were historically real; the presence of discourse markers of historicity throughout the text provide the representation with an extra layer of reality. In this way, a plausible imaginary world is constructed, generally in accordance with the dictates of (historical) reason. The effectiveness of the discourse as an analysis and hypothesis about the course of History is heightened by descriptions of structurally changing

[4] "lo que llamamos fictohistoria, en su calidad de modalidad artística, no es engañosa, pues los lectores saben (o deberían saber) que no pueden ser reales una historia contrafáctica, del futuro, de una especie no humana, de un territorio fantástico o fundada en una documentación inexistente" (Martín Rodríguez, 2013: 288). Much of this theoretical discussion comes from this essay.

[5] "comporter des marques d'historicité: des tournures verbales ou des signes graphiques ou iconiques qui renvoient aux preuves des affirmations énoncées dans le texte et qui doivent permettre aux lecteurs d'y accéder ... Mais il y a aussi des marques d'historicité internes à la langue: l'historien a besoin d'une rhétorique particulière" (Pomian, 1999: 402-403).

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trends in the face of which the individual seems to count for almost nothing. These works are not concerned with people in themselves, but with collective groups that behave like characters, as in non-fictional history. Individualized characters, if they exist, are merely agents representing or determining some historical process. They are not considered in their private dimension, in dialogue with other individuals, nor is their inner self presented either, except as a reasoned hypothesis. For Dorrit Cohn:

> Even when historical narration concerns individual figures and singulative moments ... it draws on a language of nescience, of speculation, conjecture, and induction (based on referential documentation) that is virtually unknown in fictional scenes of novels (including historical novels) cast in third-person form. (1999: 121-122)

Cohn tries to make a clear distinction between history and the novel without considering that imaginary "referential documentation," whether stated explicitly or implied, is sufficient to make a fictional text fully historical and not novelistic, simply by taking its discourse into account. Even though she recognizes that "[t]he fictional history of an other-worldly or future-worldly society, for example, or, for that matter, an 'apocryphal history' of our own world might be effectively told by a narrator posing as a historian" (120), she continues to emphasize certain intratextual markers of fictionality that *are* found in novels (or drama), but not in other forms of fiction, such as the one that we are dealing with here. Here, the historiographical form is used throughout, with virtually no intratextual marks of a novelistic kind, thus suggesting that the fictionality of a narrative may depend exclusively on non-textual markers, in particular the impossibility of referencing the material of which the fictional history is composed because it is purely imaginary.

If, on the other hand, we focus exclusively on the discourse, which is the same in both, fictional history and scientific history belong to the same (macro)genre: history. From a discursive point of view, it seems impossible to establish any difference between them. Fictional history is what it is because it presents the facts using a particular type of discourse, the historiographical, which is defined here, following Hayden White, as "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing* them" (1975: 2), together with certain formal defining markers that create the illusion of referentiality. These markers include: the absence of dialogue, except for transcriptions of crucial speeches or debates in the historical process, especially assemblies and official meetings with witnesses present; a dearth of descriptions of landscapes and physical objects; the absolute predominance of the past tense for verbs (except for annals or texts in chronological format, which are normally in the present indicative but may occasionally appear in other texts as the *historic* present); heterodiegetic narration, with the omniscience of the narrator confined to actions that can be documented or perceived from the outside; "the massive prevalence of summary over scene" (Cohn, 1999: 121), and an objectifying style that looks serious and academic with the frequent

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presence of documentary paratexts (bibliography, notes, maps, transcriptions of preexisting documents that have nothing to do with the voice of the narrator, and so on). Even the titles of some fictional histories indicate literally that they are histories and not stories, *Fragment d'histoire future* (1896), for example, by Gabriel Tarde, which came out in English in 1905 with a preface by H. G. Wells titled *Underground Man*, but whose French title means *Fragment from a Future History*.

The characteristics listed above are not exhaustive, but simply seek to highlight a few that are readily identifiable and make it easy for the reader to recognize any fictional history at a glance. These are just some of the distinctive discursive features of historiography that can be used to make it look as if history is telling itself, assertively, setting out 'what really happened'. All these discursive practices create the effect of complete and consistent factuality that is essential to the historiographical genre. The factuality effect serves, among other things, to lend extra weight to historical reflection applied to fictional matter. Imaginary events should not be interpreted as if they were simply gratuitous creations of the writer's, because the discourse presents these events as objectively historical. Hence, even if the ideal reader of the genre knows that a history set in the future cannot be anything other than fictional, that history is received nonetheless as if it were the fruit of serious research and study every bit as rigorous as any applied by the historian to the authentic revelation of the past.

The effect of factuality is underlined by the fact that the imaginary history of the future is not presented in the text as either imaginary or futuristic. Whereas the reader in his/her present world is reading a history (written in the past tense) by a (fictional) historian living in some future time, the historian who wrote it is narrating some sequence of events from his/her own past. The future historian's past corresponds to the reader's future. To resolve the paradox arising from the constant shift between points of view that would otherwise be illogical, the future historian must use past tenses to indicate clearly that the historical course of events has already taken place. The very language of imaginary history, therefore, indicates that while the time frame adopted is the future from the reader's point of view, the perspective is nonetheless a factual, rather than a hypothetical and imaginary one.

By the same token, fictional histories set in periods later than the time of their writing can also be clearly differentiated from futurological essays that purport to tell or explain to readers of the present day what the future holds in store, thanks to the presumed knowledge of the future obtained by supernatural illumination (in the case of prophecies) or by extrapolating from current trends (as in modern futurology, or futures studies). Only prophecies and futurological predictions that adopt the narrative discourse of historiography fulfill the criteria for consideration as fictional histories. *Anticipations* (1901) by H. G. Wells, for example, is not a fictional history since the verbs are in the future tense (or the conditional), so that the perspective is always that of the present; indeed, the use of future and conditional tenses is one of the distinctive discursive features of the futurological genre. As has been pointed out, however, the past tense is essential for historiographical narrative, whether fictional or non-fictional.

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Nevertheless, although the futurological essay and fictional history are two different discursive genres, they may have content in common. Futurology deals with the future and, since the Industrial Revolution, fictional history has often done so too. The Industrial Revolution not only meant a radical shift in social and economic terms—one that we still recognize today—but in the realm of the imagination, it afforded a new appreciation of the application of scientific knowledge as an essential element for imagining the future from a secular point of view without resorting to religious prophecies. After the invention of the steam engine, the sheer pace of new technological developments would surely have made it easier for the literary imagination to conceive the future as an imaginary space in which life could not possibly continue as it was in the present because technology would not only bring new machinery and inventions, but also all kinds of new social mechanisms. Hence, in the nineteenth century, and even before the Darwinian scientific revolution, there were soon writers setting their sights on claiming a new space for historiography—the future—by presenting their conjectures about the future as if they were already in the past, narrating them using exactly the same historiographical discourse as that used to narrate the *real* past.

This in short was the background to the emergence of the more inclusive mode of fictional history, the history of the future, which, partly following Ostrowski, might be better termed 'anticipatory history'[6] in order to clearly distinguish it from the purely novelistic 'future histories' that abound in science fiction. The collection of novels and stories written by Robert A. Heinlein in the 1940s and grouped together in the Future History series, for example, is not fictional history because it is a purely novelistic endeavor. Our anticipatory history, on the other hand

> should not be confused with the attempts made by some authors of anticipations to establish the temporal framework of their narration as the future. Future history … has all the appearance of a work of history, offering dry descriptions of events with figures and data, but without the contribution of novelistic discourse.[7]

Anticipatory history sets out in an objective way the development of a society over a period of time that can range in length from a few years, decades or millennia to whole geological eras. This development often starts from the contemporary situation, which is in reality what is being judged, usually critically, and traces the logical chain of events that led directly from the present to the future, but narrated in the

[6] Although Ostrowski refers only to anticipatory history in his paper, his term is also valid for any kind of fictional text written using historiographical discourse, whether it is set in the future or in an imaginary or alternate past. This is why anticipatory history may be a better term when referring only to future histories.

[7] "Nu trebuie confundată cu încercările unor autori de anticipații de a stabili cadrul temporal viitor al prozelor lor. Istoria viitoare [...] are toate aparențele unei lucrări de istorie, în care … sînt date descrieri seci ale evenimentelor, cu cifre şi date, fără contribuția discursului romanesc" (Antohi, 2005: 142). The term 'future history' used in the quotation is fully equivalent to our preferred term 'anticipatory history.'

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paradoxical past tenses that are the signature of fictional history. The use of past tenses to narrate a history of the future may seem absurd in languages that have future tenses. It should be remembered, however, that both anticipatory history, which is what we are describing here, and novelistic science fiction generally share a specific rhetorical convention that consists of creating possible future worlds using a narrative voice situated in the future that uses the past tense to give an account of events, although, as we saw above, the respective discourses of anticipatory history and novelistic science fiction set in the future are quite different from each other. This procedure generates particular effects:

> This particular rhetorical convention requires readers to project themselves outside their habitual frame of reference, which is precisely what makes it so interesting. Indeed, the figure of the historian of the future establishes a distance with respect to our own time, which is what gives this genre all its ironic force, upsetting all the certainties of the readers and obliging them to consider alternative reference systems.[8]

These "alternative reference systems" serve different purposes, giving rise thus to different types of anticipatory history. As with non-fictional historiography, the historians of the future focus on some aspects of their past, and not on others, depending on their areas of interest and their ideological and, in general, historical perspectives. Some prefer to highlight military or political events, others are largely concerned with civilizations or humankind as a whole. These different topics serve to define the various subgenres of historiography, real and fictitious, each with its moment of popularity and decline depending on the fashion at the time. Unlike its writing, which has essentially remained stable down to the present day, making it possible to formulate a theory of imaginary history as a discursive genre, the subject matter has changed and so can serve as the central thread running through a description of the history of this genre. Fictional history, more specifically anticipatory history, has its own history, which will be presented in the following section. We shall have to confine ourselves to the production in English, however, which is both abundant and representative of the whole, because to tell the story of this genre in other languages would require a much longer paper than the present one.[9]

2. A short history of anticipatory history

Anticipatory history has played a political role in the debates of every age with short-term extrapolations of certain circumstantial political phenomena, generally with political goals in mind and

[8] "Cette rhétorique particulière exige la projection du lecteur en dehors de son univers référentiel habituel, ce qui en fait tout son intérêt. En effet, la figure de l'historien du futur permet une distance par rapport à notre époque qui donne à ce genre toute sa force ironique. Elle déstabilise les certitudes du lecteur et l'oblige à envisager des systèmes référentiels alternatifs" (Kraitsowits, 2011: 82-83).

[9] For an overview of modern imaginary history in Romance languages, see the author's studies on the matter (Martín Rodríguez, 2013, 2014).

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few literary pretensions since aesthetic concerns are usually secondary to propagandistic purposes. So, their authors speculate about political developments in particular countries by recounting the history of what happened after a hypothetical regime had been imposed, or after an invasion. This is the case in the numerous accounts of future armed conflicts that accompanied nationalist tensions during the *Belle Époque*, to the extent that it could be described as a literary war between the powers of the time. Indeed, anticipatory histories focusing on war conflict represent a significant subgenre in terms of numbers, and account for a high percentage of the fictional history in that period. Although the occasional foreshadowing of war in historiographical form was written before the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 (the anonymous *History of the Sudden and Terrible Invasion of England by the French in the Month of May, 1852* (1851) for example), the golden age of the history of future wars was between 1871 and 1914. Quite a few of the numerous anticipations of war during that period could be mentioned, ranging from "The Second Armada" (1871) by Abraham Hayward to the bestseller, *The Invasion of 1910*: *With a Full Account of the Siege of London* (1906) by William Le Queux (in collaboration with H. W. Wilson).[10] An outstanding example is Charles Gleig's *When All Men Starve: Showing How England Hazarded her Naval Supremacy, and the Horrors Which Followed the Interruption of her Food Supply* (1898), in which the topic of future war is combined with a dystopian portrayal of the destruction of the bourgeois order by out-of-control masses who set fire to Buckingham Palace.

Following the slaughter of the Great War, the genre suffered an eclipse, although fictional histories of anticipated wars continued to be published, coinciding with the growing geopolitical tension prior to the Second World War. One such is *The Great Pacific War: A History of the American-Japanese Campaign of 1931-33* (1925) by H. C. Bywater, who later achieved fame because of the relative accuracy of many of the actions he predicted. Expectations of war were also relatively common later in the twentieth century during the Cold War, although their ideological premises were in general less bound up with the glorification of nationalism. The tensions of that period were propitious for the publication of fictional histories about a possible Third World War, some written by members of the military to stimulate strategic thinking. *The Third World War: A Future History* (1982) by General Sir John Hackett, for example, was described by I. F. Clarke as "the most detailed and well-informed projection in the history of these imaginary wars" (1992: 199), which may explain its enormous commercial success and the fact that it inspired imitators who tended to be equally optimistic about defeating the enemy or

[10] Examples of other fictional histories of imaginary wars in the near future are the following:, *Chapters from Future History: The Battle of Berlin* (1871) by Motley Ranke McCauley; *The Siege of London* (1884) by an unknown *Posteritas*; *The Battle of the Swash and the Capture of Canada* (1888) by Samuel Barton; *The Great War Syndicate* (1889) by Frank Richard Stockton; *The Stricken Nation* (1890) by Henry Grattan Donnelly, and *The Next Naval War* (1894) by Sir Sydney Marow Eardley-Wilmot.

the coming of true peace, such as John Bradley's *The Illustrated History of World War Three: The Cause and Effect of a Final Confrontation* (1982). The case for peace, on the other hand, is made by Leo Szilard in "The Voice of the Dolphins" (*The Voice of the Dolphins and Other Stories*, 1961), described by Barton Bernstein in the introduction to the expanded version as a "future-history fable, written from the perspective of about 1988" (Bernstein, 1992: 35), which stands out for its cautious optimism as Szilard imagines the dolphin species saving the world from nuclear holocaust thanks to its superior intelligence and use of reason.

Among the samples of future histories of political fiction that do not deal with war, posterity has retained very few of those that focus exclusively on political processes. The first of these would appear to be the anonymous English work, *The Reign of George VI, 1900-1925* (1763), which presents, in eighteenth century terms, certain European geopolitical conflicts of the first quarter of the twentieth century as if they were already in the past, which reveals incidentally just how difficult it was before the Industrial Revolution to imagine a truly different future based on technology and the new processes of production. By contrast, accelerating social change and new ways of life associated with industrialization, as well as the conflict of ideas within the framework of the new Liberalism, led to a vogue for political forecasting, in which anticipatory history was a particularly useful tool for making plausible predictions of what would happen if one trend or another were followed. In that context, historiographical discourse was useful for enhancing the realism of the warning, since the consequences of particular courses of action were not presented as merely hypothetical, but had every appearance of something that had already happened. One or two have a satirical purpose, such as *Simiocracy: A Fragment from Future History* (1884) by Arthur Montagu Brookfield, but most of these fictional political histories are more concerned with condemning or promoting particular ideologies. A case in point is the anonymous work, written under the pseudonym Lang-Tung, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire. Being a History of England between the Years 1840-1981. Written for the Use of Junior Classes in Schools by Lang-Tung, Professor of History at the Imperial University of Pekin and Tutor to the Imperial Highnesses the Princes Sing and Hang. Translated into the English Language by Yea, Pekin, 2881 A.D.* (1881), which has the idiosyncrasy of being written in question and answer form.[11]

Other works, less original in form, but which have been reissued in modern times can be added to this.[12] Some

[11] A similar title, topic and approach can be found in Elliot Evans Mills' *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire: A Brief Account of those Causes which Resulted in the Destruction of Our Late Ally, Together with a Comparison between the British and Roman Empires; Appointed for Use in the National Schools of Japan; … Tokyo, 2005* (1905).

[12] Those written before World War II and not reissued in the conventional way include: *The Island of Anarchy: A Fragment of History in the 20th Century* (1887) by E. W. (Elizabeth Waterhouse); *The English Revolution of the Twentieth Century: A Prospective History* (1894) by Henry Lazarus; *Looking Ahead: Twentieth Century Happenings* (1899) by H. Pereira-Mendes; *Looking Forward: A Dream of*

examples are: "The Fall of the Republic: An Article from a 'Court Journal' of the Thirty-First Century" (1888) (whose title in the definitive 1905 version is "The Ashes of the Beacon: An Historical Monograph Written in 4930") by Ambrose Bierce, and *President John Smith: The Story of a Peaceful Revolution* (1897) by Frederick Upham Adams. More narrowly nationalistic purposes can be observed in histories dealing with the future liberation of Ireland—the anonymous *The Re-Conquest of Ireland, A.D. 1895* (1881) and *The Battle of the Moy; or, How Ireland Gained Her Independence, 1892-1894* (1883)— and of Scotland, such as "Scottish Home Rule—A Retrospect" (1890) by Alexander Dunbar. In the same vein, an unidentified Ralph Centennius (a pseudonym) presented a glowing picture of the future Canada titled *The Dominion in 1983* (1883). Meanwhile, in 1885, Henry Standish Coverdale presented a cautionary anticipation of events leading to *The Fall of the Great Republic (1886-88)*, and an author who referred to himself as "a Diplomat" wrote *The Rise and Fall of the United States: A Leaf from History, A.D. 2060* (1898), chronicling the "retrospective" rise and decline of the United States. Jack London continued the trend in a more original way with his imaginary history essay, "Goliah" (1908; *Revolution and Other Essays*, 1910), written by a high school student of the future (2254, to be more precise), which is an ironic review of the career of a supposedly benevolent dictator.

To these fictional histories of geopolitical affairs written in the British Isles or North America can be added those written in English from other countries, some of which have the distinction of being the first examples of anticolonial literature written by the colonized. In India, "A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945" (1835) by Kylas Chunder Dutt and "The Republic of Orissá: A Page from the Annals of the Twentieth Century" (1845; *Bengaliana: A Dish of Rice and Curry, and Other Indigestible Ingredients*, 1877) by Shoshee Chunder Dutt use the generic mold of fictional history to interrogate British imperialism by giving what claims to be a truthful (or at least plausible) view of the future struggles for freedom. According to their modern editor:

> In both cases, the use of a futuristic historical setting produces a caricatured, chronologically distanced picture of British rule, while at the same time allowing both authors to make provocative associations between their own lack of political freedom and contemporary issues such as the debate over slavery and Jacobin radicalism. (Tickell, 2005: 19)

This speculative treatment of Western imperialism is not exceptional and there are, in fact, some interesting manifestations in anticipatory history, highlighting those that address a topic that was controversial at the time and remains so in the present day: race relations. In the particular circumstances of South Africa, it led to a series of works about the possible evolution of apartheid imposed there by the white minority, such

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the United States of the Americas in 1999 (1899) by Arthur Bird; *Perfecting the Earth: A Piece of Possible History* (1902) by C. W. Wooldridge, "The *Coup d'État* of 1961" (1908) by Henry Dwight Sedgwick, "The New Sin" (1920; *Essays in Satire*, 1928) by Ronald A. Knox, and "The Era of the Press Cæsars" (1931; *The Stranger of the* Ulysses, 1934) by L. S. Amery.

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as *When Smuts Goes: A History of South Africa from 1952 to 2010 First Published in 2015* (1947) by Arthur Keppel-Jones, *Verwoerd-The End: A Look-back from the Future* (1961) by Garry Alligham, or *South Africa 1994-2004: A Popular History* (1991) by Tom Barnard (Deon Geldenhuys), all of which tend to swing between discontent and ambiguous utopianism. In Michael Green's view, "the best South African 'future histories' …, while they may suffer the limits of some degree of failure, still manage to find their significance in a bodying forth of the utopian form" (1997: 287).

The fantasized struggle of the races, however, had reached its fictional peak well before that in the *Belle Époque*, affecting almost all the Western world, when the so-called Yellow Peril craze (with reference to China and occasionally to Japan) led to imaginary exploitations of the theme that fed popular anxiety. Some of this fictional work took the form of anticipatory histories. In *The Invasion of New York: or, How Hawaii Was Annexed* (1897) by John Henry Palmer, the threat of a possible Japanese invasion of Hawaii serves as a pretext for the United States to annex that Polynesian archipelago in the name of the superiority of the white race over the natives (who had already established a fully Western, internationally-recognized type of State) and of the need to protect itself from rival imperialist powers. Its blend of anti-Asian (and anti-Polynesian) racism and nationalist propaganda aimed at a mass readership has few rivals among the war fantasies in this particular tendency, almost none of which, in John Rieder's view, "coheres to imperialist agendas with the polemical deliberateness of Palmer's" (2012: 98). These race wars and civilizations of the future at least accept the possibility that the Asians could fight Westerners on equal terms, and even defeat them. The yellow peril narrative could be regarded as the fruit of both the ambient racism at the time and of imperial rivalries of a similar kind commonly found in war histories involving European powers.

Other works of this type express racism in its purest form. One that stands out for its extremism is the proposal by the British writer, W. D. Hay, whose lengthy anticipatory history, *Three Hundred Years Hence*, or *A Voice from Posterity* (1881), is a display of unremitting social Darwinism. Hay imagines the deliberate annihilation of all non-white races as a positive thing, a continuation of European imperial history taken to its logical conclusions. His history is consistent with the intensified attitude of exploitation that underlay certain influential historical and (anti)-utopian views at that time, whose central tenet, "which dominates the narrative in *Three Hundred Years Hence*, was the expectation that the Baconian dream of the 'effecting of all things possible' would be realised in the continuing fault-free exploitation and control of all natural forces" (Clarke, 2001: 2-3). In the same vein and no less shocking, at least after a cursory reading, is a brief future history by Jack London, titled "The Unparalleled Invasion: Excerpt from Walt Mervin's 'Certain Essays in History'" (1910; *The Strength of the Strong*, 1911), which is almost unparalleled in its atrocity. The solution to the yellow peril was the complete genocide of the Chinese people using bacteriological warfare, followed by the colonization of the Celestial Empire by the Whites. The shocking heartlessness of the story is, if anything, heightened by the matter-of-fact way in

which London tells it, with a perfect mastery of the apocalyptic register:

> Perhaps the most astonishing thing about this astonishing story is the smugness of its tone. The lingering delight of the piling up of corpses, in the scenes of cannibalism and devastation, is familiar from many other apocalyptic narratives, even though few of them achieve a comparable degree of nonchalance. But more striking than the sadism is a matter-of-factness in describing genocide as both necessary and desirable. (Gomel, 2000: 421)

Nonetheless, the exaggerated nature of the story and the fact that China is not made to appear as the aggressor power, but as the victim, have prompted readings that incline towards the hypothesis that its message is antiracist and anti-imperialist:

> The story is not a work in which Chinese, or any other Orientals, are to be pigeon-holed as the "Yellow Peril" and dismissed as inferior to the white race. On the contrary, London had at last opened his eyes to the double-standards of the West, to its gratuitous assumption that it was all right for Western nations only to adventure beyond their parallels into the lands of other peoples, to dispossess those peoples. (Berkove, 1999: 37-38)

Whether or not that is true, London's story is typical of a widespread cultural phenomenon. His anticipatory history simply projected a common attitude onto a future time, an attitude that could also be found in the contemporary nationalist bias in history and, in the human sciences more generally in the Age of Imperialism, in the rise of social Darwinism. The actual theories of Charles Darwin, on the other hand, which the social Darwinists misunderstood so badly, are more faithfully reflected in a minority current of anticipatory history. This latter version has learned the lesson of evolutionary Darwinism, in the sense that the natural mutability of conditions would need to be translated into adaptation via a radical transformation of society and of the human being in future ages. Regardless of whether or not the human will is involved, the future stretches so far into the distance in such works that the individual ceases to be a relevant factor and is replaced by the species and its destiny. This occurs in two monumental anticipatory histories published in the 1930s, both of which met with great success.

In his markedly essayistic book, *The Shape of Things to Come: The Ultimate Revolution* (1933), H. G. Wells blends sociological reflection and speculation about the short- to medium-term future (1933–2106). Future historical events are largely hidden beneath the profusion of explanatory digressions in which Wells the prophet and ideologue almost takes over Wells the writer. Despite its appearance, the work remains a literary product, a fictional history, even though its narrative content is clearly subordinated to ideology, to the point that its detached approach and apparent lack of human perspective have created the impression that there is "a *hardness* about the text, an inflexibility which is uncharacteristic of his work as a whole" (Hammond, 1993: XXXVI). The genre chosen, one that does not permit the subjective play of the individual as such and which Wells cultivates here in its most orthodox form, should also be taken into account. To this could also be added the fact that Wells, a well-known author

at the time whose words carried great weight, did not set out to depict individualized human beings, but to present his project for the radical reform of society using intellectually convincing fiction. His proposal was for a worldwide scientific technocracy, capable of moving beyond the national and political disputes whose aggressive particularism was threatening to take the world into a second world war, which was, in fact, what happened, although not exactly on the terms that he imagined. Nevertheless, it was not so much a question of the prophecies coming true as of issuing a warning so that measures could be taken to prevent the disasters forecast, and even of presenting a program of political solutions for the theorized utopian future.

A younger contemporary of Wells, Olaf Stapledon, would embark on a similar venture, although with greater emphasis on the visionary, in *Darkness and the Light* (1942), whose title expresses the formal and conceptual structure of this history of the future. On the one hand, a few wrong decisions made in the present lead to an unequal, dystopian society, the corollary of which is the inevitable downward spiral towards the extinction of the human species. The author describes this in just a few paragraphs and with an apparent coldness that serves only to highlight its shockingly extreme nature. In the alternative course of history, on the other hand, the light prevails and humanity successfully negotiates the obstacles that it has put in its own way and heads off towards a better future. This should not however lead us to think of Stapledon as a utopian in the traditional sense.[13] Although his imagined society, while not ideal, is undoubtedly better, its history is told in such a way that it too is exposed to natural laws and to the inevitability of evolution, in the face of which humankind has no alternative but to adapt if it can. From this point of view, *Darkness and the Light* continues the spirit of Stapledon's most famous history of the future, *Last and First Men: A Story of the Near and Far Future* (1930). This is a grandiose work that has been considered a sort of "Miltonic epic" (McCarthy, 1984: 244), although it is mainly inspired by another and much shorter imaginary history, titled "The Last Judgment" (*Possible Worlds*, 1927), which is probably "the most influential and revealing thing" (Adams, 2000: 460) ever written by J. B. S. Haldane.

In *Last and First Men*, Stapledon takes his evolutionary perspective of humanity as a natural entity to its limits with a profoundly original myth of the future,[14] in which art and history merge in accordance with the author's purpose. It concerns "a titanically impersonal and public fantasy of the future, focusing on

[13] "Stapledon's utopianism is less an affair of premeditated social planning than the arousal of a state of mind, an awakening of the will for the light. Powerful as that will is when it is shared by a global community of wide-awake men and women, utopian desire is not bullet-proof. Stapledon's utopians face hard choices and internal controversies; they are subject to disease and terrestrial cataclysms that undermine, and sometimes destroy, utopian achievements; they sometimes backslide when social innovation starts to harden into orthodoxy; ultimately, they must confront a cosmos which may itself be indifferent or hostile to the human will for light" (Crossley, 1982: 299).

[14] "Stapledon has used his knowledge of the myth of the past to create a myth of the future" (Satty, 1979: 1141).

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races and civilizations, not in individuals" (Huntington, 1982: 257). This history ranges over such a colossal sweep of time that it provides the author with enough imaginative space to show the theory of evolution as it unfolds, requiring millions of years for its effects to be clearly noticed, and in such a way that nature and history converge: "Darwin meets Spengler" (Philmus, 2005: 116).

After a few chapters in which Stapledon imagines the geopolitical tensions that the world might experience, the sociopolitical approach gives way to another one in which successive catastrophes of different kinds are about to wipe humanity from the face of the earth. Nevertheless, these catastrophes facilitate evolutionary leaps that lead to a total of eighteen human species, some of which even create those that will succeed them so that they can adapt to changing astronomical and planetary conditions. In spite of the occasional setbacks and regressions, the trend is upwards until the most perfect species, the eighteenth, is reached. By this stage, all minds have been successfully fused into a single collective mind. This ideal was shared at the time by quite a few intellectuals close to Marxism, including Stapledon himself, although it should be pointed out that *Last and First Men* reflects a humanistic idealism that is more all-embracing in scope than the more earthly Marxist Economism, for "man is to live in intimate conjunction—and strange confrontation—with the universe. Out of this interaction with the ultimate environment is to emerge a wholly new union of body and mind, whose achievement is to be both the victory and the tragedy of the Last Men" (Kinnaird, 1986: 45). In point of fact, perfection is neither eternal nor immutable, but rather subject to the entropy of the universe. The eighteenth species is eventually extinguished when the Sun becomes a nova and consumes the whole of the solar system. This end is tragic, but not pessimistic, due to the author's outlook, which is wholly humanistic, and the deep impression left by his stylistic control of register. Humanity as a species could scarcely avoid its fate by following Stapledon's premises, which he so lucidly expounds. The remoteness of the end, however, removes all sense of urgency, leaving just the grandiosity of the panorama, so grandiose in fact that it was well-nigh impossible for fictional history to continue going down that particular avenue any further.

Since there was no further way forward and, in any case, the Second World War and the Nazi atrocities helped delegitimize the doctrines that underpinned the vast majority of the described texts, the genre went into relative decline after the war ended. It did not cease to have interesting offshoots though, particularly in the satirical register.[15] In England, humor and metafiction were fused in a very original way in two very similar works: *Tomorrow Revealed* by John Atkins and *A Short*

[15] For example, "Fourth Fable" (*Farfetched Fables*, 1950) by George Bernard Shaw; "Null-P" (1951; The Wooden Star, 1968) and "The Liberation of Earth" (1953; *Of All Possible Worlds*, 1955) by William Tenn; "The Ambassadors" (1952) by Anthony Bucher; "Eisenhower's Nightmare: The McCarthy-Malenkov Pact" (*Nightmares of Eminent Persons and Other Stories*, 1954) by Bertrand Russell; "The Good Neighbors" (1960; *Good Neighbors and Other Strangers*, 1972) by Edgar Pangborn, and "Heresies of the Huge God: The Secret Book of Harad IV" (1966; *The Moment of Eclipse*, 1970) by Brian Aldiss.

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History of the Future by R. C. Churchill, both published in 1955. Both were written in the form of history textbooks from the distant future, reconstructed from the only documents that had survived: a few science fiction novels, including British scientific romances and novels of the American science fiction genre. These literary sources are treated as if they are authentic historical documents, which not only creates the resulting comic effect for the reader, who is in on the secret, but also serves, particularly in the case of Churchill, to mock the pretensions of historiography, without forgetting the ideological aspirations (or obsessions) that underlie the narratives used:

> Churchill's version is particularly amusing because it makes fun of the way we describe and interpret the past – which is always dependent on the assumptions and scholarship we bring to it and therefore always subject to revision. (Sawyer, 2008: 43)

One of the effects of this kind of treatment is to relativize, for instance, the warning of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), one of the sources used, by positioning it on a historical trajectory that disproves the fear of totalitarianism extending into the foreseeable future. A further contemporary anticipatory history, Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (1958), seems less optimistic. This history of the implementation of a technocracy based on individual merit, which takes precedence over the free democratic will, is "presented as a report written in late 2033 or early 2034 by a sociologist who is attempting to explain the sources and historical background of the growing social unrest" (Booker, 1994: 289). The report is so ambiguous that, were it not because a popular rebellion is about to overthrow the system, the satire would pass for utopia, which is what the positive connotations of the term 'meritocracy,' immortalized here, suggest.[16] Even if only for the purposes of setting up an idea in order to oppose it, Young came up with the concept of meritocracy and showed how it worked in practice in a book of anticipatory history. The fact that the Penguin group published it as non-fiction in their Pelican collection underlines the illusory suppression of its fictionality beneath the cloak of historiographical discourse, which may in turn have facilitated its acceptance as an authentic sociological proposal.

The Rise of the Meritocracy was also a success from the point of view of its exploitation of the semiotic possibilities of its discursive genre: fictional history. It is more than likely, therefore, that apart from its influence on the rediscovery of fictional histories written in the form of scientific romances, like those of Wells and Stapledon, it also influenced later writing with a similar sociological focus anticipating more global scenarios, such as *The Third Millennium: A History of the World A.D. 2000-3000* (1985) by Brian Stableford and David Langford, and *A Short History of the Future*

[16] "[T]he use of the term 'meritocracy' has evolved and taken a life and a meaning that is divorced from Young's original contradictory intent, although the spirit of ambiguity embedded in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* still thrives. Young created a tension between the utopian and dystopian visions of meritocracy, which act to counterbalance each other within the original text" (Donovan, 2006: 72).

(1989/1992/1999) by W. Warren Wagar. Both appear to be attuned to the excitement leading up to the impending third millennium, as well as to the ideas being suggested by futurology, which was very popular at the time. Despite that, these ambitious works scarcely made any impression at all, perhaps because the time was not favorable, and later attempts in a similar vein, such as *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (2014) by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, fared no better. Even though a relatively high number of short fictional histories have appeared since 1970, the feeling is that the genre has lost much of its former vitality.[17] The very brevity of the stories is a good indicator of the distrust of the great historical-fictional constructions of the past, which were interpreted as attempts to use fiction to create the master narratives so abhorred by postmodern relativism. Bearing in mind the continuing cultural hegemony of the postmodern strand of thought, the question arises as to whether the genre can be reactivated by major new attempts to imagine the shape of things to come, to look at our future as if it were the past—over and done with and able to be recounted—to imagine an even more remote future, in other words, *Die Vergangenheit unserer Zukunft* (The Past of Our Future, 1908), the title of an early, all-inclusive anticipatory German history by Gustav Adolf Melchers. For Ostrowski, the first scholar in the field of imaginary history, it does not look as if historiographical discourse can have much future in the context of a literature and culture with little appreciation for values that were once standard, such as rigorous self-discipline and epic heroism:

> The demands of extreme asceticism as regards the style, of intellectual force, and of an epic greatness are so exacting that they do not seem to promise either numerous authors or many outstanding achievements in writing imaginary histories. (1960: 38)

Nevertheless, this discursive genre, somewhere between history and literature, surely meets a deeply felt need to construct fictitious hypotheses with the extra degree of certainty implied by the legitimizing discourse of historiography. Despite the present absolute predominance of the novel, it can still be demonstrated that history writing is not incompatible with literariness, at least insofar as its discourse is concerned. When all is said and done, if it is possible to write pure novels that faithfully respect real historiographical materials, it is also possible to write pure histories with totally fictitious content, and they should be studied for what they are, rather than as imperfect novels.

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[17] For example, "*Our Neural Chernobyl*" (1988; *Globalhead*, 1992) by Bruce Sterling, which is presented as a review summary of a history book; "The Evolution of Human Science" (2000; *Stories of Your Life and Others*, 2002) by Ted Chiang; "Applied Mathematical Theology" (2006; *Anomalies*, 2012) by Gregory Benford. These fictions lay out the course and the anthropological, social and philosophical consequences of hypothetical scientific experiments or procedures, while other prospective histories extrapolate the consequences of technological progress and the postmodern evolution of attitudes in fictional histories like "The Greatest Television Show on Earth" (1972), "The Life and Death of God" (1976), "The Largest Theme Park in the World" (1989) and "The Message from Mars" (1992) all by J. G. Ballard and collected together in *The Complete Short Stories* (2001).

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3. Some conclusions

The fundamental difference between a novel and a fictional history of the future was pointed out in the context of Wagar's anticipatory history, a distinction that can be extended to the whole genre of fictional history:

> *A Short History of the Future* tests the imagination more strenuously than most of what is marketed as science fiction, but—*caveat emptor*—it does not offer readers the familiar pleasures of a novel: Time itself is the chief protagonist, and casts of characters come and go in the course of events. There is intellectual suspense in the uncertainty about what ideological and political forces will dominate events and to what effect, but plot as psychological drama is largely absent. And because dynamic process rather than static achievement is the motive of the fiction-making, resolution, closure, the novelistic sense of an ending, are not appropriate. (Crossley, 1993: 918)

The fact that its characters are societies and its perspective that of whole eras gives the fiction a public dimension that is generally absent from the story or novel, whose focus on characters with names and surnames directs the reading towards the inner micro problems of individuals, even in so-called collective character novels, which are usually nothing more than vignettes of individual destinies placed side by side. Fictional history is another matter entirely and should be addressed in its own terms so that it can be assessed on its own merits, both literary and historiographical. The former include original, imaginative exploitation of a literary discourse that is characterized by the solid rhetorical architecture of historiography—which usually prevents authors from the lapses of register and style that are so much easier to make with the apparent freedom of novel writing—while the imaginary content introduces the intellectual suspense demanded by a readership no longer satisfied, as it was in Antiquity, with mere rewritings of the same histories/stories. The historiographical merits of the genre, for their part, may lie in their speculative value as reflections on the future course of history. By adopting the perspective of future historians narrating their past, which from the vantage point of the present is our future, anticipatory history has greater demonstrative value since it does not appear as a mere conditional hypothesis, but as a series of events that have already happened and can now be assessed *historically*. Because it looks referential, the history of the future acquires extra factual plausibility, inasmuch as the future historian's account appears to be based on the same type of documentary sources as the historiographical accounts of the past. Hence the hypothesis about the future acquires the legitimacy of the historical method, along with greater power of persuasion as a 'master narrative' extrapolated to the future.

In its anticipatory mode, fictional history has conquered new territory for historiography. Until now, it has mostly been exploited by literary writers. The question now arises as to whether professional historians could not follow their example, in a similar way to those historians whose experiments with 'counterfactual history' have opened up new horizons for historiography by following the writers of alternate history. David Staley, for example, suggests this when he claims: "Historians are well

equipped to write imaginative, disciplined, and realistic histories of the future" (Staley, 2002: 89). Wagar had the same thought: "Scholars who are in the habit of telling stories about the past are especially well positioned to tell stories about the future" (1998: 367). If indeed they do so, it is to be expected that they will realize that imaginary history is a genre in its own right and has been well cultivated in the last two centuries, as the present overview has tried to demonstrate.

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