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## Counterfactual Histories: Philip Roth and Nicole Krauss

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**Abstract:** The canon of verisimilitude is a widely discussed concept, aiming at establishing the fictional pact ever since Aristotle's *Poetics*. Multiple experiences of time seem to unsettle the logic of this fictional pact. To highlight the disjunctive chrono-methodology and its implications in reformulating a well-established canon, I choose the concept of uchronia – developed and discussed theoretically and literarily by two American writers of Jewish origin, Philip Roth and Nicole Krauss. The two developed alternative legacies and counterfactual histories of Franz Kafka: He either escapes to Palestine or gets immersed into an accomplished love relationship with Dora Dymant during the last year of his life. Thus, the “u-chronic” writers unsettle Kafka's canonical legacy left to Max Brod, the official detainer of his post-mortem history.

**Keywords:** Uchronia; Literary Canon; Counterfactual History; Philip Roth; Nicole Krauss; Franz Kafka; Legacy.

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The canon of verisimilitude is a widely discussed concept aiming at establishing the fictional pact ever since Aristotle's *Poetics*. Multiple incommensurable experiences of time seem to unsettle the logic of this fictional pact and induce a sensitive scale of referentiality in recalling autobiographical details, as well as events or figures of literary history. To highlight this disjunctive chrono-methodology and its implications in reformulating a well-established canon, I choose the concept of uchronia – developed and discussed theoretically and literarily by two American writers of Jewish origin, Philip Roth and Nicole Krauss – based on three understandings of the term: counterfactual history, plausible alternative history, and semi-plausible alternative history. I will address the elaborate perspectives on literary history and canon of the two writers, who develop alternative legacies and histories related to Franz Kafka: He either escapes to Palestine or gets immersed into an accomplished love relationship with Dora Dymant during the last year of his life. Thus, the “u-chronic” writers unsettle Kafka's canonical legacy left to Max Brod, the official detainer of his post-mortem history.

All literary creations that belong to the genre of “alternate history” have the following element in common: The starting point can be any happening, decision, or incident that is modified in the “alternative world,” thus offering an answer to the question, “What would have happened if?” The main problem the historian has to confront is that most of these stories are written by historians themselves as counterfactual history.

The idea underlined here is that there is a disturbed isomorphism between the rationality of fiction and the rationality of facts. According to J. Rancière<sup>1</sup>, there is a strange equivalence between modes of intelligibility belonging to the construction of fiction and those belonging to the construction of non-fictional accounts indebted to a historical phenomenon: Reality must be fictionalized in order to be thought. Thus, the frontier between the reason of facts and the reason of fiction is eluded because art reconstructs fiction. The latter is a material reconnection of signs and images, which build a canonical legacy in an alternate manner.

Moreover, Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou address the way history becomes a mixed material where facts and absurdity are superficially intertwined. This is an essential part of the production of significance. They also mention the persistence of counterfactual histories in the works of historians nowadays, through the idea of turning points, simple or multiple ones, gradual or violent<sup>2</sup>. Whether they are given scientific names, such as counterfactual, virtual, speculative, conjectural, or parafactual history, all these forms of questioning start from one crucial premise: What would have happened if a specific event had not occurred? As highlighted by

Nietzsche, this search for truth eludes the absolute quest and explores a rather situated truth.

In his work, *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom considers that “if we were literally immortal, or even if our span were doubled to seven score of years, say, we could give up all argument about canons. But we have an interval only, and then our place knows us no more, and stuffing that interval with bad writing, in the name of whatever social justice, does not seem to me to be the responsibility of the literary critic.” Bloom further argues that the “[c]anon, far from being the servant of the dominant social class, is the minister of death.”<sup>3</sup> To counter such a powerful message of death, uchronia represents a subversive articulation of the canon by nuancing the point of departure and staging different screenplays of death’s seductive evasions. Thus, counterfactual histories bear the message of the aftermath of death, a challenge addressed to two understandings of the canon. First, the canon is a message of the so-called odyssey of contest and combat as responses to finitude and death. Odes, from Pindar to Hölderlin and Yeats, had proclaimed their immortality and self-canonization through contest and exclusion<sup>4</sup>. Second, there is another understanding of the canon whose most appropriate metaphor is rendered by the multiple silts or the plural layers of fabric. Not the solitary death but the coming into being of a remnant, of a new posture of being: “Let the dead poets consent to stand aside for us, Artaud cried out; but that is exactly what they will not consent to do.”<sup>5</sup>

The Canon is associated then with the solitude of every literary text, linked by Paul de Man with individual death (Bloom 31) – an image against which Harold Bloom

protested, suggesting the ironical analogy of every human appearance in the world with the birth of a poem. Thus, it depends on how the canon is conceived: as a relay of testimonies (a long history of competitive legacies) or, on the contrary, as a Penelope tapestry, as webs relating to each other in continuity.

Canon is thus either infinite contest, barbarism (Bloom wonders how it is possible for violent writers such as Milton and Dante to be neutralized, having become pious writers) or metamorphosis.

As a departure from the canon, *uchronia* means staging the aftermath of death. To underline this understanding of *uchronia*, I will refer to two American writers of Jewish origin, Philip Roth and Nicole Krauss, who both imagine an apocryphal legacy of Kafka. Krauss understands this form of *uchronia* as being in two places simultaneously, escaping to unreality or preparing the ultimate escape the same way we write alternate narratives of death.

According to Bloom, if there is something in Kafka that represents his legacy most accurately, it is his canonical patience and indestructibility: "There is no need for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't even wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked; it can't do otherwise; in raptures it will writhe before."<sup>6</sup> Kafka's evasion is his patience in prolonging his spectral life into unreality.

Kafka's unreality is mostly visible in his letters, which underline his relation to a ghostly world. He left his legacy to Max Brod, stating that all his unfinished works should be burned, which turned into an extensive debate on how Kafka himself

opened up the possibility to further evasions to be performed by Max Brod. Of course, Kafka could have burnt his unfinished or unpolished writings. But the fact that Kafka did not do it himself means that he opened up a battlefield for possible scenarios for different and alternative stories. His death is a long letter from the underground sent to the unreality of an imagined land. Or to the unreality of worldly happiness, as depicted by Roth:

The easy possibility of letter-writing must – seen merely theoretically – have brought into the world a terrible disintegration of souls. It is, in fact, an intercourse relationship with ghosts – not only with the ghost of the recipient but also with one's own ghost, which develops between the lines of the letter one is writing and even more so in a series of letters where one letter corroborates the other and can refer to it as a witness... Humanity senses this and fights against it and I order to eliminate as far as possible the ghostly element between people and to create a natural communication, the peace of souls, it has invented the railway, the motor car, the airplane... But it's no longer any good... The ghosts won't starve, but we will perish.<sup>7</sup>

*Uchronia* is also, in this sense, the postponed anxiety of letters that don't reach their destination, an apocryphal legacy that leads to a final evasion as a radical transformation, as if the destination was finally reached. Canonical legacy is thus constituted by texts that cannot escape their inherent limitations, that maintain the anxiety of ghostly relationships, not being able to

lead to metamorphosis. Apocryphal legacy, uchronic aftermath, exhaustion of ghosts, all these mean a leap into unreality, being in two places at once, metamorphosis.

Fiction writers stage exemplary evasions. In *The Counterlife*, Philip Roth affirms that “What people envy in the novelist aren’t the things that the novelists think are so enviable but the performing selves that the author indulges, the slipping irresponsibly in and out of his skin, the revealing not in ‘I’ but in escaping ‘I,’ even if it involves – *especially* if it involves – piling imaginary afflictions upon.”<sup>8</sup>

As mentioned above, evasion means being in two places at once. This double bind involves a counterfactual referentiality. As if we stated that the whole development of the narrative would lead us to a place where we have already been beforehand. As if two parallel stories were traced simultaneously. Nicole Krauss confirms the idea:

The idea of being in two places at once goes back a long way with me. Goes back for as long as I can remember, I should say, since one of my earliest memories is of watching a children’s show on TV, and suddenly spotting myself in the small studio audience... One could say that the sense of self is still porous in young children. That the oceanic feeling persists for some time until the scaffolding is at last removed from the walls we labor to build around ourselves under the command of an innate instinct, however touched by the sadness that comes of knowing we’ll spend the rest of our lives searching for an escape. And yet even today, I have absolutely no doubt about what I saw then... And yet the surprise of

what I’d seen must have settled down through me, and as my sense of the world was built up on top of it, it must have alchemized into belief: not that there were two of me, which is the stuff of nightmares, but that I, in my uniqueness, might possibly be inhabiting two separate planes of existence.<sup>9</sup>

This quote must be a key to understanding the reason why Nicole Krauss has chosen to stage Kafka’s apocryphal legacy in her novel *Forest Dark*, especially since the novel finishes with her return from the desert of Israel to her home in New York as if she were still sitting there without having had moved at all: “Through the front window I could see my children playing on the floor, heads bent over a game. They didn’t see me. And for a while I didn’t see myself either, sitting in a chair in the corner, already there.”<sup>10</sup>

Both writers I am analyzing here (Philip Roth and Nicole Krauss), staging Kafka’s uchronical rewritings of his canonical legacy, are true to Kafka’s stumbling block: He made the greatest literature out of his impossibility to escape. He was imprisoned in his parents’ apartment, to a job hostile to his inner conditions, to his erotic impossibility, and to his ghostly relationship to hundreds of letters he wrote throughout his life. Kafka’s legacy, at its most, is the enactment of his own death: Joseph K., Gregor Samsa, and the Hunger Artist are stationary. They cannot move and will die prisoners of their conditions. In a chapter of her novel, called *Ghilgul*, Krauss affirms:

He’d been staging his own death for years, hadn’t he? *Away from here, just*

*away from here!* Remember the line?... Is it any coincidence that Kafka believed his finest passages were enactments of his own death? He once told Brod that the secret to them lay in the fact that while his fictional surrogates suffered, and felt death to be hard and unjust, he himself rejoiced in the idea of dying. Not because he wanted to end his life, Friedman said,... but because he felt he had never really lived. He continued: When Kafka imagined his own funeral in a letter to Brod, he described it as a body that had always been a corpse being at last consigned to the grave.<sup>11</sup>

And, all of a sudden, a different facet of Kafka appears, true to his indefinite legacy of perpetual death and more canonical than his archives left to Brod. This is a man who started to listen to Hasidic folk tales and Kabbalistic mysticism until, eventually, he became profoundly taken by the fantasy of emigrating to Palestine.

This fantasy is not in contradiction with Kafka's entire life. It is a type of metamorphosis that fulfills his life's un-lived possibilities, namely, as Krauss mentioned: "And yet, Friedman said, holding up a thick finger – to truly understand why Kafka had to die in order to come here, why he was willing to sacrifice everything to do so, you have to understand a critical point. And it is this: it was never the potential reality of Israel that inspired his fantasies. It was its unreality."<sup>12</sup> It is a form of unreality as powerful as the unreality of literature. His only possible spiritual home.

This unreality is as living and working manually in a kibbutz, surviving through bread, water, and dates. But this is not

enough. Disappearance and survival in a kibbutz are not enough for Kafka's "fog machine," a remembrance machine enacted and fueled by Brod, but impossible without other characters, Bergmann and Puaah, who planned to take Kafka to Palestine. Without them, the author who wrote *Metamorphosis* would have disappeared from this world without metamorphosing. Without this "fog machine," he would have never escaped the tyranny of his father, "never have gotten out of Europe, where, had he survived his tuberculosis, he would later have been murdered along with his three sisters by the Nazis."<sup>13</sup> Or metamorphosis means rather than transformation from one form to another, the possibility of continuity of the soul through different material realities.

Uchronia means, thus, an unfinished pact. For Kafka, it means that his work must be published with the claim of being unfinished and unpolished: "As for publishing so-called unfinished work," Friedman continued, "can't you see the brilliance of it? Think about it: Wouldn't every writer want his stories and books and plays to be published with the claim that they remained unfinished?"<sup>14</sup> This is the firsthand fictional pact. The secondary uchronic fictional pact is left to the writer herself: "A sense of what Friedman might be asking of me began slowly to sink in: not to write the end of a real play by Kafka, but to write the real end of his life. Max Brod and his fog and schlock were long gone... Did Friedman want to get in front of the story to control how it would be written? To shape, through fiction, the story of Kafka's afterlife in Israel, as Brod had shaped the canonical story of his life and death in Europe?"<sup>15</sup>

Besides metamorphosis, escape, being in two places at once, and staging uchronian

apocryphal aftermath, there is one more point that I would like to underline. It is connected to Kafka's canonical spectrum as part of the staged counterfactual history: I will return to his canonical patience and indestructibility. Krauss' metaphor for it is the forests of Israel, devastated, wave after wave, by history and civilization, leaving behind the skeleton of the land. The desert is the remnant of fertile forests. Metamorphosis passes through desert, but "to be at rest" means (etymologically) restoring for-rest:

There was a time, (Galit had told him), when the whole southern and eastern Mediterranean, from Lebanon down through North Africa and Greece, had been covered with forests. But with each war they had been plundered for timber, turned into fleets that in the end had sunk to the bottom of the sea with their drowned. And bit by bit, as the trees were stripped away and the land plowed into fields, the earth dried out, and the fertile soil was blown away by hot winds, or washed away by the rain and rivers, and where once six hundred cities had flourished on the coast of North Africa, the population dwindled, and sand blew through and covered the ruins of empty cities with dunes... Mount Lebanon was stripped for the temples at Tyre and Sidon, and then the First and Second Temples of Jerusalem...<sup>16</sup>

Uchronia means, moreover, the possibility of revival. Revival as living differently, intensely, repeatedly, before time goes bankrupt: We are in 1923. Kafka will die in nine months. We know it, and he possibly does,

too. And we know that, as for his civil situation, his life lacks completely exceptional details: "Never before has he even remotely succeeded in living apart independent of his mother, his sisters, and his father, nor has he been a writer other than in those few hours when he is not working in the legal department of the Workers Accident Insurance Office in Prague."<sup>17</sup> No remote detail about a writer's career, about striking debates. He will die in nine months, and his last year is an uchronic evasion, a re-composed death, an apocryphal legacy. We do not know whether the relationship with Dora Dymant, a young Jewish girl he met at a seaside resort in Germany, has truly evolved the way Roth depicts it. But it is a fictional experiment that helps us think Kafka's paradigmatic, uchronic escapism through and through. The evasion into the relationship with Dora Dymant is as unreal as Nicole Krauss' version of his escape to Palestine. This depiction of the last year of his life is consequently the most prolific expansion of a counterfactual history related to Kafka's legacy.

Kafka has already been in "ghostly relationships," meaning writing letters mostly to two women, Felice Bauer and Milena Jesenska-Pollak. Still, he repeatedly failed, either in his role of a passionate lover or in his potential role as a father or the head of a family. These existential possibilities are stretched out from his life map because they belong to his father. They are barred to Kafka the writer because they are precisely the possession of his father: "Marrying is barred to me, he tells his father, because it is your domain. Sometimes I imagine the map of the world spread out and you stretched diagonally across it. And I feel as if I could consider living in only those

regions that are not covered by you or are not within your reach.”<sup>18</sup>

Due to this unaccomplished existential pact, Kafka writes a long letter to his father in 1919 that is not delivered by his mother (again, letters that do not reach their destination). In his letters to Milena, the word fear appears page after page. Fear of resembling his father, fear of failure, fear of impotence. He failed in his mission of becoming a husband or a lover. And all of a sudden, in 1923, nine months before his death, he “penetrates the Castle, evades his indictment,” escaping: “[t]he poet of the ungraspable and the unresolved, whose belief in the immovable barrier separating the wish from its realization is at the heart of his excruciating visions of defeat – the Kafka whose fiction refutes every easy touching humanist daydream of salvation and justice and fulfillment with densely imagined counterdreams that mock all solutions and escapes – this Kafka evades.”<sup>19</sup>

He is barred marriage by the rabbi and questioned by Dora’s father, who voices a clear no: a healthy young girl like Dora should not marry a man double her age, soon to die. And still, they move together and live in Berlin until his death. What kind of a un-Kafka-like dream had Kafka been dreaming? Under the pressure of death, he seems more than ever determined to live a kind of antagonistic dream. Apparently antagonistic because he continues to write what seemed to be impossible beforehand – a personal reconciliation and “sardonic self-acceptance,” a tolerance of one’s “own brand of madness.”<sup>20</sup>

He will name this short story “The Burrow,” the tale of an animal whose life is organized entirely around the principle of defense. He will bury this animal under a

complicated system of underground corridors that should ensure his peace of mind. But, the more he buries himself, the more the anxious animal shows his claws and pushes his forehead.

This strange short story, conceived in the “happiest period of his life,” also represents Kafka’s Prospero. A magical metamorphosis out of a relentless entrapment: “a portrait of the artist in all his ingenuity, anxiety, isolation, dissatisfaction, relentlessness, obsessiveness, secretiveness, paranoia and self-addiction – a portrait of the magical thinker at the end of his tether, Kafka’s Prospero.”<sup>21</sup>

Although a strange transformation, this is still in accordance with the intricate system of relationships Kafka entangles with the ghostly world of letters. Kafka’s legacy gives rise to a continuous exchange of letters between the world of death and the world of the living. By searching for a final metamorphosis, described by the uchronia imagined by both writers, this letter exchange stages an impossible mapping of exclusion. The castle can never be built. Kafka’s legacy is scaffolded on non-exhaustion and non-escape. Contrastingly, his uchronia gives voice to metamorphosis and revival, to indestructibility and rest. As a *Counterlife* opposed to the one in which he was immersed in finitude and death. As a different canon, tapestry rather than contest and competitiveness.

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## NOTES

1. There is an entire chapter in J. Rancière's book, *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique*, Éditions La Fabrique, 2000, – "If we Have to Induce that History is Fiction. Modes of Fiction" (trad. aut.), originally « S'il faut en conclure que l'histoire est fiction. Des modes de la fiction », which discusses the idea that reality has to be fictionalized in order to be thought. This affirmation has nothing to do with the question whether or not things are real or unreal, but with the way history is fashioned as a common destiny, related to those that make it visible.
2. This idea appears also in other contributions, such as A. Abbott, "Transcending general linear reality," in *Time Matters. On Theory and Method*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001, R. M. J. Byrne, *The Rational Imagination: How People Create Alternatives to Reality*, MA, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005, N. Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, New York, Basic Books, 1997, V. Wohl (ed.), *Probabilities, Hypotheticals and Counterfactuals in Ancient Greek Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014. A major gap appears in the interpretation of counterfactual histories, concerning the purpose of this fictional tool: is it used to formulate hypotheses or, on the contrary, to alternatively narrate and fictionalize history?
3. H. Bloom, *The Western Canon. The Books and Schools of the Ages*, London, Papermac, 1994. p. 32.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 449.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 452.
8. P. Roth, *The Counterlife*, New York, Vintage International, 1996, p. 210.
9. N. Krauss, *Forest Dark*, London, Oxford, New York, Bloomsbury, 1918, p. 39.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 156-157.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 178.



17. P. Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975, p. 182.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
21. *Ibid.*