

What's (Not) Happening?

RACHEL SEILER-SMITH

According to both of our authors, the eighteenth century possesses robust, varying forms for contending with the counterfactual: what Nush's paper succinctly defines as "pretending a thing we know did not happen, did," and that David's paper identifies with the acts of imagining things that could happen, but don't. Whereas the piratical imagination in the eighteenth century signals a readerly "willingness...to invest in an alternative world," the projecting imagination marks the development of a "speculative enterprise" that works to gain a "rhetorical hold on the future." David's work asks what happened to those ideas that history seems to have lost; Nush's paper contends more with the ideas that seem to have abandoned history (or rather, "historical accuracy"). What I found so intriguing about Nush's claims about counterfactualism was the notion that piracy is particularly poised to enter into fast-and-loose plays with boundaries and conventions, since pirates (by sheer virtue of being such) are transgressive, working "outside the bounds of law, culture, and nation." Pirates "court fiction," she writes. Though perhaps that's too aristocratic a rendering of piracy—a romanticization; the piratical imagination might well plunder and pillage history in its commandeering of fictional strategies. This brings me to my first question, which is, (I hope) a *deceptively* simple one that Nush's paper—and to an extent, David's—raised for me: that is, how much does our grasp on the counterfactual in the eighteenth century rely on a stable notion of the factual? If we abide by Mary Poovey's claims (and I'm not necessarily suggesting we do), the "fact" was a tenuous "epistemological unit" in the eighteenth century.¹ Are we assuming facticity is "a thing" in the eighteenth century when we use the term counterfactual? Or does counterfactualism—like piracy—allow us to scrutinize facticity in playfully serious ways? It seems like pirate narratives might call attention to the fragility of thinking history a fact of the past, just as the project calls into question whether futurity itself is a fact—not just if something *will happen*, but that *anything* will happen.

I suppose, then, that another way we might pose this question is by couching it more firmly in the notion of "happening": what does it mean that something "happens" or it doesn't? What is a "happening"? The *OED* defines it as an "event, action, etc: to take place, to come to pass, occur...to ensue as an effect or result"; but "happen," especially in the eighteenth century, also means "perhaps, maybe." Happening is *both* an occurrence and an uncertain potentiality. And I think one of the most insightful offerings these pieces provide, as papers authored by literary critics, is a tracking of how "shit happens" in a variety of forms: the pirate drama is a happening, an event, even if what it portrays takes piratical license with a past that has its own assumptions about what "happened"; projects, in imagining things that should happen and might happen, enact a rhetorical happening that is more ephemeral and difficult to trace, but nonetheless there. Such a question may be a symptom of my own disciplinary context—maybe even my cultural context: I can't help thinking of Harry Potter's final chat with Dumbledore at King's Cross Station (a chat, notably, about Harry's future)—in which the boy asks about the nature of

¹ *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

the conversation's "happening," of its facticity, its realness, to which the sage responds: "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real"? Now, that reference might date *me*, but what I wonder is whether or not our assumptions about facticity and our definitions of what it means to "happen" date *us*—and what we might make of dating such definitions within the eighteenth century.

This brings me to my last question, which is not unconnected to the penultimate one: David's paper argues that we wish to see ourselves in the past—in the novel, the self, the nation, the rise of capitalism etc; and he suggests that these claims "of origin and upsurge... implicat[e] our desire to make the past a history of modernity—to find prefigurations of ourselves in the 1600 and 1800s." But, as his work evinces, the "project" also implicates the desires of those in the past to prefigure themselves into the future—in a modernity that is only "postmodern" in the literal sense that it is a modernity that comes after their own, a period "postponed" and delayed but, for better or worse, inevitable (or is it?). David argues, provocatively I think, that plumbing the wreckages of projection reveals a form of the past "incongruous to the grand historical narratives we have constructed": an emphasis on the eighteenth-century project "unstreamlin[e]s the histories we inherit and make." Yet David also calls the project our "eighteenth-century inheritance" that we "use and inhabit daily" so much so that its distinctive formal and rhetorical strategies, if not its historical roots, have been largely invisible. This seems to me a claim of prefiguring ourselves in the eighteenth century, and of rooting our own sense of modernity in the narratives of the eighteenth century we already write. Admittedly, I take little issue with such prefigurations. I tend to describe similar moves as taking a sort of Brechtian approach to the past in which we in the twenty-first century perform a "stand-besideness" when reading the eighteenth century: respecting both the alterity of the character of the eighteenth century and working, at the same time, to understand that character in relation to ourselves. If I'm not mistaken, though, David's paper is attempting to straddle a critique (albeit a generous one) of this method at the same time that the form of the "project" suggests such a mode of thinking is inevitable. At the very least, the project reveals the difficulty of wresting ourselves away from that method despite *our* best intentions. I welcome David's clarification on this point, but I also invite Nush to comment. As her work demonstrates, the ennobling and amelioration of pirates might signal that eighteenth-century readers and writers too wanted to see more of themselves in the transgressive characters of the past so that their modern sensibilities could continue to enjoy pirates and piracy in the future. Are these maneuvers—not only of projecting ourselves into the future, but also projecting ourselves onto the past—an eighteenth-century inheritance? And, maybe more important: is such a move to be classified as "counterfactual"? Despite their employment of counterfactualism, these papers encourage us to think otherwise—and this is particularly relevant to historians, too, of course.