The World Turned Upside Down: Exploring Alternate History with Young Adults

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss the theoretical, educational and creative aspects of an alternate history creative writing project with young adults, based on Terry Pratchett's fantasy novel *Nation* (2008). First, we focus on the potential of the project as a platform for studying how close teenage audiences are to ideal readers of utopian texts who, as Kenneth Roemer (2003) characterizes them, 'approach literary utopias as opportunities to discover questions, ambiguities, and contradictions out of which they imagine their own models of utopia' (p. 2). We also see the proposed project as a useful tool both to promote the knowledge of world history and to provoke a reflection on contributions of individuals to larger historical processes. Moreover, we discuss the project as a means to develop those English language skills necessary for students to construct narratives, express causality, and formulate hypothesis or predictions. Finally, we confront the assumptions underpinning the project with students' reactions to the novel, as recorded during an initial workshop, and with their creative work in English following the workshop.

Keywords: alternate history, the third conditional, utopia, teenage learners, creative writing

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Introduction

Nation (2008), Terry Pratchett's fantasy novel which was an Honor Book in the 2009 Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, chronicles how two young adults engage in a collective utopian effort to rebuild their communities. In a parallel universe of the mid 19th century, Mau, a member of a tribe inhabiting a large island in the Great Southern Pelagic Ocean, and Daphne, a Victorian girl who turns out to be the second in line to the British throne, are brought together by a tsunami which has wiped away Mau's community, the Nation, and left Daphne shipwrecked on his island. Regardless of the enormous cultural gap that divides them, they must learn not only how to survive, but also how to create a new civilization. Hence Pratchett's novel can be seen as a story of a utopian effort of a collective rebuilding of Mau's Nation and of a revolutionary transformation of Daphne's country, according to the ethics of understanding and respect. Pratchett's emphasis on the imperative of imagining utopian alternatives has prompted us to develop a creative writing project for young readers that would test to what extent *Nation* can be seen as a source of 'textual invitations' (Roemer, 2003, p.6) capable of encouraging young people to reflect on their own reality. Based on the assumption that foreign language learning proceeds more smoothly through 'socialization' (Kramsch, 2002) and 'participation' (Hall, 2005) than through mere acquisition, the project would also verify whether the 'what if' games that followed our discussion of *Nation* make it easier for teenage learners to speculate in English and to express in writing their own ideas for transformative potentialities in the real world.

Nation as a Utopian Text

The utopian potential of Pratchett's novel resides in its being an alternate history narrative located in a parallel world. In a nutshell, alternate history is a subgenre of speculative fiction that encompasses stories presenting alternative visions of history. As Andy Duncan (2003) points out, this kind of 'what if' literature centres on depicting 'the moment of divergence from the historical record, as well as the consequences of that divergence' (p.

209), which is to cater for 'a reader's interest not only in how its focal characters change and develop, but in how their world changes and develops as well' (p. 210). For Karen Hellekson (2001), 'the alternate history rewrites history and reality, thus transforming the world and our understanding of reality. These texts change the present by transforming the past' (p. 4). In contrast, utopian writing is an attempt to affect the present by creating a vision of a possible future as different from the current status quo. However, what connects the alternate history and utopian writing is the concentration on evoking new realities by formulating difference, possibility, and transformation, which occurs through combined mechanisms of extrapolation from the real world and the experience of cognitive estrangement: in both genres the reader is encouraged to look at his or her own world/situation critically to distinguish certain, and often not that obviously undesirable, aspects of reality that can be changed. Ideally, such a choice should be followed by a speculation about directions and the nature of alterations.

In *Nation*, the moment of divergence is signalled by the information that in 1860 the Russian Influenza killed all heirs to the British throne but the hundred and thirty-ninth one, who happens to be Henry Fanshaw, the Governor of Mercia and Daphne's father. Simultaneously, such details as the mention of the Great Southern Pelagic Ocean or Port Mercia cue readers to understand that they are not reading about fictional events set in a reality they would identify as their own, but that they have entered an alternative world which only bears some resemblance to their own. Notwithstanding this realization, the repeated allusions to past historical events are likely to cause readers to compare the development of world history as they know it to the timeline presented in the novel. Such a background and the attitude it encourages on the part of readers are crucial for the assessment of another alteration introduced by Pratchett later in the novel. As Daphne is becoming increasingly engaged in the formation of the new community, she discovers that the Nation is in fact the oldest civilization, which, in its heyday, made momentous scientific discoveries. Because the island was destroyed by a tsunami, the knowledge accumulated by the Nation has survived only in children's songs. In the meantime, similar discoveries were made again by Western civilization, which, as is implied by Pratchett's story, loses its claim to cultural and scientific superiority over other peoples. To reclaim the Nation's glorious past and to avoid being absorbed into the British Empire, Mau asks

the British monarch to make the community a member of the scientific Royal Society. In this way the island retains its independence and turns into an important destination for scholars worldwide. By crafting this shift in global scientific power, Pratchett may have intended to inspire a critical reflection on instrumental uses of knowledge as a means of establishing political and economic domination of a given country. Moreover, readers may be inclined to reflect on how policies of scientific imperialism camouflage attempts to gain control over colonized populations by organizing and interpreting the body of gathered information so that it could be applied to the ideological construction of indigenous peoples and to accounting for the history of the colonial enterprise itself.

Despite providing a positive conclusion of the story in the form of a prospective reconciliation between colonisers and the colonised, Pratchett highlights the fact that utopian projects usually remain far from fully accomplished and necessitate a lifelong commitment. Therefore, the author makes his young protagonists realize that they have to fulfil their utopian mission separately. Mau transforms his island into a haven for scholars, while Daphne returns to her world to inherit the British crown. As can be concluded from the epilogue, tellingly entitled 'Today', the Western imperialistic drive gives way to a harmonious coexistence of various peoples, as well as to the exchange of scientific knowledge between the Nation and Western scholars. Significantly, the epilogue occurs more than 200 hundred years after the meeting of Mau and Daphne and the discovery of the Nation's scientific past. Hence the speculation about what happened and what did not happen in between constitutes a pleasure and challenge for readers willing to fill in the empty timeline. Clearly, this is the case in *Nation*, which can be classified as an example of 'the genetic paradigm of history' (Hellekson, 2011, p. 9) in that it foregrounds the influence of a past event on the present. Simultaneously, readers may wonder what could have happened if the scenario presented by Pratchett had actually occurred and how it could have prevented the intensification of conflicts in the 20th and 21st centuries. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, readers may explore how the reality they experience has come into being by attempting to define what they think are crucial historical moments. These mental adventures may in turn result in a consideration of the narrativity and arbitrariness of history as just another text, which integrates random events into a coherent linear story.

In light of the above discussion it is clear that the alternate history is a means to examine lineaments of national and global histories. Yet, it may also focus on micro-histories of individuals who affect the course of events on a smaller scale and, as Duncan (2003) comments, engage in the destruction and recreation of 'alternate versions' of themselves through their everyday actions (p. 217). In *Nation*, Mau's and Daphne's predicaments continually challenge them to reinvent their subjectivities, and in particular the way they perceive their own limitations and capabilities. This process is symbolized particularly vividly by the girl's decision to change her first name from Ermintrude to Daphne. For the protagonist, the former stands for the subjugation to Victorian morals and manners, while the latter signifies her growing confidence in her own judgment, creativity and courage. The inner transformation of Mau is marked by shifts in how he perceives himself: first, as a blue hermit crab without a shell or a boy that cannot become a man, and later as the leader and guide of the Nation. In both cases, the shaping of the self takes place in the context of the characters' relationships with their communities, and parallels their growing social awareness. Finally, the protagonists are depicted as willing to use the knowledge and experience they have gathered to carry on their utopian venture, which means that the shaping of subjectivity does not cease at the end of the novel and it is up to the reader to imagine how it will develop.

Apart from several essays focusing on specific texts or authors, there have been six lengthy scholarly publications pertaining to utopianism is children's literature (Bradford, Mallan, McCallum & Stephens, 2008; Hintz & Ostry, 2003; Mickenberg, 2006; Mickenberg & Nel, 2008; Reynolds, 2007 and *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature* 15.2, 2005). Although all these publications are very informative and comprehensive sources that should certainly be consulted in any study of utopianism in literature for children, they do not focus in detail on young readers' responses to utopian texts. Bradford et al. (2008), for example, comment in very general terms on the effect utopian texts may have on young audiences: 'these texts intend to open young readers' minds to alternative ways of being and becoming in order to create a better world for the future' (p. 184). Our paper can be seen as a substantiation of this claim in that it shows how the critical, educational and creative potential of the alternate history makes it an effective means of fulfilling utopian intentions. Besides offering an amusing and creative

instrument for sharpening teen readers' historical awareness, this genre first and foremost illuminates the need to put an end to viewing history as a static, inflexible category.

Goals and Theoretical Underpinnings

Alternate histories, and *Nation* is no exception, require considerable critical contribution on the part of the reader. In the very last sentence of *Nation*, Pratchett (2008) thus comments on the intellectual experience offered by his novel: '*Thinking.* This book contains some. Whether you try it at home is up to you' (p. 410). However trite Pratchett's exhortation may sound, it ideally summarizes the main premise behind our project, that literature can serve as an effective pedagogical tool deployed in the classroom for the purpose of first honing the communication skills of students learning English as a foreign language and secondly inciting those students to think critically about the extra-textual reality. More specifically, we assume that on the basis of *Nation* the participants of the workshop will acquire the ability to make speculations, express doubts and formulate criticism in English. Such a linguistic starting point – the capacity to utilize the speculative 'what if?' and the transformational 'what ought to' in speech – will later facilitate the execution of the interpretative task: the students will show they are able to identify the features and functions of utopian texts and alternate histories, as well as to approach such texts as starting points for their own deliberations about the real world.

In line with the belief that language, literature and culture are inextricably linked, the project integrates insights from discourse-analytical (MacCabe 1984; Carter 1991), communicative-learning (McRae 1996; Hirvela 1996) and culture-oriented (Kramsch 2002) approaches to language teaching, which, for all their different emphases, seem to complement one another. Clearly, the past few decades have witnessed intensified efforts to challenge the predominance of traditional methods in second language education. Whereas traditional pedagogies reduce literature to 'a model of good writing' or an illustration of 'the grading of vocabulary and structures' (Maley, 2007, p. 3), alternative approaches view literature as discourse rather than a grammar resource, and as a space for negotiation. While the communicative theory stresses the importance of stimulating the learner's meaning formation by means of 'authentic texts and "real" language' (Hall, 2005, p. 55), culturally oriented theories expand this idea by bringing literature to the fore.

Considered as central forms of 'cultural and linguistic negotiation (or struggle)' (Hall, 2005, p. 67), such texts as Pratchett's *Nation* grant the student easy access to English-language culture and, in contrast to 'authentic texts' extolled by communicative approaches, enable us to see this culture as a dynamic phenomenon 'constituted through creative (primarily linguistic) interactions in social contexts' (Hall, 2005, p. 76). In addition, the activities proposed herein may also be seen as encouraging the following three fundamental levels of literacy specified by Blau in (2003): '[t]extual literacy, or *procedural knowledge*'; '[i]ntertextual literacy, or *informational knowledge*'; and '[p]erformative literacy, or *enabling knowledge*' p. (203). As readers of a foreign language literary text, the participants of our workshop, or, in Hall's (2005) phraseology, 'border crossers' (p. 68), find *Nation* challenging not only on a linguistic level but, more importantly, on a cultural level. As Blau (2003) comments on this experience, literature 'offer[s] us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in alternative cultures,' demanding of us 'the responsibility of attempting to understand historical and cultural contexts' represented by the texts we read (p. 208). Thus, in order to grapple with these obstacles, the students have to negotiate their trans-cultural identity through construction of their own narratives. As Hall (2005) notes, 'we all use stories to establish relations and develop our ideas and meanings with others (…) and narrate time and space' (p. 31). Following this logic, we assume that each of the fourteen participants of our project, equipped with his/her own 'narrative competence' (Hall, 2005, p. 32) and personal 'baggage' (Gavins, 2003, p. 130), will produce different readings, which stands at variance with Stanley Fish's (1980) 'interpretive community' concept. Simultaneously, we believe, in keeping with cognitive approaches to literary reading, that *Nation* as a literary narrative can both re-configure the students' hitherto perception of English-language culture and assist them in 'developing advanced critical, reflective and expressive language and literary skills' (Hall, 2005, p. 31).

The project will investigate how second language learners react to the 'network of response-inviting structures' (Roemer, 2003, p. 2) embedded in Pratchett's *Nation*. We base our knowledge of the aesthetic effect elicited with utopian literature on observations made in Morson's *The Boundaries of Genre* (1981) and Roemer's *Utopian Audiences* (2003). Morson points to two main factors playing a vital role in generating the meaning of a literary utopia: 'the readers' assumptions about (1) the appropriate conventions for

interpreting the work, and (2) the literary tradition in which it is placed' (Morson cited in Roemer, 2003, p. 2). Roemer goes a step further. He arrives at the conclusion that utopias do not only alter readers' beliefs about their present but they 'can also create room: (1) for the development of critical perspectives about the present hitherto unexamined by the reader and (2) for the potential acceptance of the utopian models or norms implied by or stated "in" the imaginary better world' (Roemer, 2003, p. 63).

Description of Participants and Outline of the Workshop

The participants were fourteen Polish secondary school students from Wroclaw, Poland. The group consisted of an equal number of 17-year-old girls and boys. All of them had an intermediate level of English (B1) at the time, which constituted the prerequisite for the participation in the workshop[i].

To stimulate the creation of the 'room' mentioned above, the workshop was divided into three closely related parts, all of which were conducted in English and together took about an hour and a half to complete. To begin with, we intended to spark a discussion (circa 30 minutes) based on the material, a precisely selected miscellany of excerpts from *Nation*, which the participants had been assigned to read in advance. To facilitate the reading process, the students had also been provided with a useful set of instructions about how to approach *Nation*. First of all, the instruction pointed to *Nation's* affinity with alternate history and invited the students to speculate about what may hide behind the term. In reference to an excerpt entitled 'How Imo Made the World, in the Time When Things Were Otherwise and the Moon Was Different' (p. 1), as well as to the entire novel, the students were asked to consult their knowledge of nineteenth-century history. By doing this, they would be able to identify how the nineteenth century as we understand it differs from that century as portrayed in the novel. Finally, the student's attention was drawn to the significance of the discovery Daphne and Mau make in the cave, to how it alters the state of the current knowledge about the world (in the novel) and how it influences the further development of history (in the novel). After the discussion, the instructors gave a 15-minute mini-lecture on alternate history and its different renditions in the history of literature. Equipped with this large amount of knowledge, the students had no difficulty dealing with their next task. During the third part of the workshop (the remaining 45

minutes), they were presented with five scenarios of alternate history, all of which referred to the real world and which invited the participants to address problems that are currently agitating the global community.

The *Nation* Workshop

Part one

We began the meeting by asking the students about their own reading preferences. Although some students admitted that they read fantasy fiction, they were not familiar with Pratchett's literary output although the majority of his works, including *Nation*, have been translated into Polish. When asked whether they found anything interesting in the assigned excerpts, they mentioned the creation myth opening the novel and pointed out Pratchett's reworking of the theory of evolution: according to the Nation's mythology, people come from dolphins. When we inquired if the students found this idea intriguing, they were rather reluctant to speculate about possible consequences of such a version of humanity's past. We believe that this unwillingness may be ascribed to the students' relatively little familiarity with the fantasy genre. Focusing on the other excerpts, some students expressed their admiration for Mau's unwavering sense of responsibility for the Nation and for Daphne's determination to overcome prejudices and become accepted by the inhabitants of the island. Finally, they were interested in Ataba, a priest who questions Mau's rejection of religion and tradition.

In the ensuing discussion, we asked the students to identify the timeline of the novel. Even though they had no problems determining the period in very general terms, they found it difficult to position the events in British history. Therefore, we had to discuss specific historical references employed by Pratchett to develop an alternative version of the past. Among others, we commented on the Russian Influenza, the Victorian period and the growth of Britain as an empire, as well as on the crisis of values caused by scientific discoveries. It seems that the students' lack of familiarity with the British contexts is a result of their being non-western readers who have been raised in a different cultural milieu. Hence it could be argued that Pratchett's novel appeals to a limited group of readers, which in turn detracts from its critical potential. However, our workshop testifies

that in fact the book may serve as an effective tool for bridging the epistemological gap between disparate cultures. Simultaneously, we made sure that the students acquired the basic vocabulary related to the above-mentioned elements from British history.

Having established the factual background constructed by Pratchett, we asked the students to point out the most striking changes introduced by the author to alter the official version of history. One student expressed his skepticism at the suggestion that the telescope could have been invented outside Europe, in a 'primitive' community. However, another student commented that inventions often come into being either owing to a coincidence or because of a specific need for a solution, hence she did not find Pratchett's idea unjustified. Nevertheless, when we encouraged the students to generalize about the purpose of the depiction of the Nation as an old civilization of explorers and inventors, they seemed unable to detect the anti-imperialist theme. Hence we had to explain that Mau's demand that the Nation become a collective member of the Royal Society and a centre of learning is motivated by the urge to escape incorporation into the empire. Interestingly enough, one of the students commented aptly that Mau's decision may also turn out risky, and the Nation could in fact lose its independence.

The interpretative helplessness on the part of the students affected also their reading of the epilogue. Although they enjoyed the ending for not being too sentimental, they were unwilling to speculate about what happened after Daphne had left the island and how both Mau's decision and the British king's open-mindedness could have altered history. Nor did they recognize the names of real-life scientists (with the exception of Einstein) that visited the Nation in the twentieth century. When asked about the possibility that the world wars did not happen, they seemed rather baffled even if the idea appealed to them. One student explained that such a development of history seems unlikely as people are bound to compete and engage in violent conflicts. We believe that this 'speculative illiteracy' (Roemer, cited in Ferns, 1999, p. 232) can be attributed not so much to the young adults' inability to conceive of alternatives to the status quo, but rather to their lack of familiarity with and practice of speculation encouraged by such genres as fantasy, alternate history, and science fiction.

Part two

The textual analysis was followed by a mini-lecture on alternate history. Having been presented with the interpretation of Pratchett's novel as an example of this genre, the students were now able to identify the fundamental 'what if' question as the basis of the alternate history. We then expanded the basic definition of the genre by indicating the crucial element of the point of divergence. Finally, we provided the students with a list of scenarios often used by writers to present alternative timelines. Hence the students were exposed to such expressions as 'parallel worlds', 'multiverse', 'chronocracy', 'time loop', 'timeslip', 'estrangement' and 'extrapolation'. The students were able to provide examples of particular narrative strategies in popular culture (e.g. *Back to the Future*, *Groundhog Day*, *The Butterfly Effect*). We closed the theoretical part of the lecture with a general question about the sense of writing alternate histories. One of the conclusions that the students formulated independently was that learning about an alternative past may be an encouragement to think critically about the present and to consciously and actively shape the future. One of the students also noticed insightfully that an alternative past does not necessarily have to present a better version than that of official history but may indicate dystopian historical developments meant as a warning to readers.

Unexpectedly, the debate over the significance of alternate histories brought us to yet another problem that agitated the participants. It turned out that the students felt they were given a reductive account of history at school. In addition, their dissatisfaction with history classes was caused by the fact that the curriculum Polish schools follow requires the teacher to present history in chronological order rather than by focusing on different aspects of one problem. The explicitly expressed desire to go beyond the strict confines of the curriculum underscores the need to approach historical accounts from a multitude of perspectives. However, our suggestion that history at school should include both male and female perspectives met with mixed reactions, especially on the part of the boys. The girls welcomed the idea with much more enthusiasm, remarking that the deliberate omission of marginalized voices in historical accounts amounts to social injustice.

Though divided on the issue of gendered history, the students now had a knowledge base for the discussion of specific examples of alternate history. If the first part of the workshop revealed the participants' conspicuous lack of expertise in British history,

the analytical part of the mini-lecture demonstrated that the students felt at ease referring to Polish history, especially that connected with WW II. Our summary of Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) drew enthusiastic responses. The students not only proved able to identify which three countries comprised the Axis powers but they also found credible the speculation that the USA, under totalitarian rule, would resort to censorship and slavery. By contrast, they all rejected scenarios of the reversed situation – Poland's glorious victory and Germany's defeat. The students' inability (or reluctance) to project their country as victor may partially result from the fact that their perception of WW II is heavily influenced by the Polish ideology of casting Poland in the role of an eternal victim. The students were also presented with two thematically dissimilar works: Lyon Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* (1939) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Camp's alternate history features a twentieth-century American archaeologist who travels back to sixth-century Rome and prevents the descending of the Dark Ages by introducing the printing press, Arabic numerals and Copernican astronomy. Ishiguro's alternate history invents a contrary scenario: it posits that the so-called social advancement may at times lead to social degeneration. In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro's alternate England 'is organized according to biological engineering' (Spedo cited in Oki, 2011, p. 95), with clones being allowed to live under the condition that they must accept their fate as future donors. The students viewed these two alternate histories with ambivalence. If at first Camp's travelling protagonist evoked recollections of the popular series *Back to Future*, the participants found it inconceivable that humanity could skip the Dark Ages. In a similar vein, the students espoused Ishiguro's idea of producing clones that could replace flawed organs of human beings, albeit they were uncertain how to grapple with the ethical dilemmas arising from human cloning. It may be assumed, then, that today's generation of young adults is oriented towards future and refrains from making attempts to speculate about 'fixed' history.

Part three

The final part of the workshop was designed to evaluate the students' practical knowledge of alternate history after being exposed to material on the topic. The participants were divided into groups of two- or three-person teams and given different tasks. Two of the

teams were expected to speculate how the introduction of the Anti-Counterfeit Trade Agreement (ACTA) bill in Poland would affect our increasingly internet-dependent society. Aware of what the ACTA reform may entail, the students subscribed to the belief that the introduction of the bill would initially lead to mass protests, followed by a consumer boycott of formerly free-of-charge products. The two teams envisaged that the restrictions would facilitate the detention of those disseminating illegal internet files. Significantly, as the students reiterated, with limited access to culture and information, our freedom would be severely curtailed. On a more hopeful note, the restrictions on the use of the internet would induce people to 'go outside' instead of being chained to the computer.

Another team was asked to propose further reforms aimed at preserving the environment in a 2011 world inhabited by eco-friendly citizens who, to slow down the depletion of ozone layer, decide to abandon their vehicles and replace them with horses and wagons. This scenario met with the team's wholehearted approval, despite the fact that, as the team put it, it would mean 'in part going back to the Dark Ages'. In such a world, computers would lose their significance and become reduced to one of many forms of entertainment. Concomitantly, an eco-friendly world would naturally make extensive use of natural and renewable energy resources and would take recycling for granted. Finally, yet another team had to refer to their historical knowledge linked to the events of December 1981 to speculate what would have happened if the Poland of 1981 had escaped the implementation of Martial Law and had been ruled by the democracy-loving movement, Solidarity. Characteristically, the students once again expressed their scepticism regarding interferences in the past. For them, the point of divergence proposed in the scenario would exert a marginal impact on Poland's economic climate of the time. As the team remarked, surrounded by communist countries as it was, Poland would face alienation, which would affect the country's trade balance. In sum, the final part of the workshop led us to two intriguing observations: first that the students were typically keen on elaborating the scenarios which were anchored in their immediate reality and secondly that our game not only stimulated the students' linguistic and conceptual creativity but also motivated them to speculate in English in a contextualized, creative and entertaining way.

Discussion of the Students' Literary Output

Following the workshop, we invited the students to enter a contest for the best alternate history. In response to our call, we have received thirteen contributions, three of which did not qualify as alternate history since they fulfilled neither of our two evaluation criteria: first that the contestant makes use of the 2nd or 3rd conditional and secondly that he or she creates counterfactual history by introducing a point of divergence. Noteworthy is that whereas during the workshop the students demonstrated moderate commitment to the speculative task, their unexpectedly creative literary output gave evidence to the contrary.

The texts touched upon a wide scope of themes, ranging from descriptions of football matches to deliberations about such fundamental issues as time, hatred and death. Four students decided to alter history as we know it by speculating, among other things, what would have happened if before WW II, in 1937, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs had ceded Madagascar, a former French colony, to Poland. Presumably inspired by Pratchett's *Nation*, the author of the quoted story portrayed the island as an asylum for the Polish government in exile, which with time becomes one of the world's most desirable places to visit because of its great infrastructure and Polish hospitality. In another text, depicting how, having earlier beaten its German opponents, the Polish national football team makes it to the final of the 1974 World Cup, Poland is likewise presented in a dominant light, which partly contradicts our observations made during the workshop that the students tend to cast their country in the role of a loser. Typically, most of the submitted texts were anchored in the authors' immediate present, which bears out our finding that the students evince a particular interest in rewriting and transforming their own reality. Three contestants took time as their main subject. One of them used an imaginative point of divergence by positing that in her alternative world time runs backwards. In this contribution, time manifests itself both on the conceptual and structural level: we not only learn that the elderly are young, children are dying, the dead come to life, but we also have to piece together the jigsaw of the narrator's scattered memories. Employing a somewhat clichéd motif of travelling in time, the two other contributions made it clear that experiments with time may work to our advantage. For example, a journey into a world set in the near future may prevent a catastrophe, or even the end of the world. Finally, two

further alternative scenarios – of an idealized parallel world that can be discerned only through the lenses of binoculars, and of a world in which 9/11 never happened – served as a social critique. As the author of the former scenario remarked, life in the perfect parallel world, devoid of emotions and pain, where 'going to school is abolished', seems unbearable. In the latter scenario, it is the USA and its war-on-terrorism doctrine that come in for scathing criticism. Reading the story, we learn that the president of an alternative America, a country filled with unjustified hatred for Muslims, plots to blow up two planes flying to the US on the grounds that the Muslim people on board may pose a threat to the World Trade Centre. But, as the author ironically concluded, what if 'the 9/11 attacks were never meant to be attacks?' And what if 'it turned out terrorists never existed' and 'they were just white people's racist imaginary creations of Muslims?' Although the student's story is redolent of a conspiracy theory, it may also be seen as a token of a critical and deconstructive attitude to official and orthodox accounts of events as caused by some intangible general forces and not by specific policy decisions of concrete persons.

Besides indicating the students' sharp critical thinking skills and creativity, the analyzed alternate histories also evidenced that the participants by and large grasped the importance of both the point of divergence and the 2nd and 3rd conditional structures for the alternate history genre. Five of them started their stories by asking a hypothetical question, such as: 'What would happen if death didn't exist?'; 'What if God was one of us?' or 'What could have happened if Burton had chosen a different bed?' At times, the conditional structures were used to close the story, as in the following case: 'If suddenly they [the dinosaurs] disappeared, life would get so much harder.' The majority of the authors, however, decided to introduce their moments of divergence through estrangement: in one of the alternative stories, the reader is likely to be struck by the fact that the ordinary image of kids playing on the ground is with no prior warning followed by the depiction of an elderly woman walking around the park with her dinosaur on a leash. In yet another story, the protagonist prides himself on having constructed (in collaboration with 'a mad scientist') a time machine by dint of which we could travel back to a different past that clearly has no notion of war: 'The year was 1942, but in the newspapers there weren't any articles about WW II. We asked people about the outcome of the war, but none of them had heard of any war before.' In addition to being predicated on cognitive estrangement,

most of the submitted works favoured the past simple tense at the cost of the suggested grammatical structures, which may mean that the students either wished to seamlessly incorporate speculation into their narratives or they did not receive sufficient feedback on the 2nd and 3rd conditionals during the workshop.

Conclusion

Our main intention in devising a workshop based on Terry Pratchett's *Nation* was to create a model of an activity that would prove the significance of literature in educational practices aimed at encouraging young people to reflect on their own experience of history and its influence on the present and the future. We also hoped that the participants would become interested in Pratchett's evocation of an alternative world history, or specifically British history, as a basis for speculation about a better future. Simultaneously, we intended to boost both the students' literary and historical competence and their English language proficiency. Finally, we hoped their artistic production would serve as verification of the effectiveness of literature as a frame of reference for a critical assessment of potentialities in their own world. Although our enthusiasm about this endeavour considerably waned after meeting with the students, their serious commitment to the exercise and their creative imagination in describing alternative historical developments endorsed our belief in the sociocultural significance of utopian literature in general, and alternative history in particular. Naturally, the fact that young people are capable of clarifying their values does not necessarily mean that they will apply this ability to their own future behaviours as creative agents of change. Yet, as we have shown, this agency can be fostered through utopian literature. However overconfident such a conviction may sound, we also hope that educators will find our project a useful example of empowering young adult language learners' critical thinking skills as prerequisites for young people's willingness to shape the world they inherit from adults.

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