

CHAPTER SIX

ALTERNATE HISTORY AS COUNTERMONUMENT

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For all it signifies or is hoped to represent, a monument reifies a moment or period in time; it converts that time and its events into a concrete entity. Most generally, the monument materializes a past occurrence into something that can be perceived at the present moment with one or more of the five senses. In this respect the monument accords memory—an abstract, subjective conception of the past—a concrete, sensed place in the present; memory refers to the realm of the past, and is represented in the present—in the form of a monument—by its transmogrification into something corporeal.

During the 1980s Germany saw the emergence of a mutation of the monument: the countermonument. In *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, James E. Young presents case studies of countermonuments, which, while quite different in nature, adhere to several of the same, “nontraditional” characteristics. Instead of standing in representation, these were designed to disappear, neutralize another monument, or create a negative representation of an absent monument. Uniting them is a need to “challenge the very premises of their being.” These countermonuments are “ethically certain of their duty to remember, but aesthetically skeptical of the assumptions underpinning traditional memorial forms.”¹

Despite their differences, both monuments and countermonuments commemorate events in memory. However, the scope of memory is not limited to events that have actually taken place. There is also the memory of what could have happened—what people living at the time of a given event in the past thought could happen in their future. Alternate history, often considered to be a subgenre of science fiction, provides an account of these other, imagined futures. An analysis of the alternate history novel, *The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth, illustrates that in telling us about memory, alternate history novels stand in its commemoration. What is more, the specific characteristics and aims of alternate history novels render them literary countermonuments.