Peter van Toorn was deeply troubled. It was the 1970s, and an anti-formalist hostility was sweeping Canadian poetry. Poets couldn’t strip their practice of classical devices fast enough. Looking around at his peers, the twenty-six-year-old watched them all but desert the descriptive tradition he credited for the finest poems in the language. Van Toorn belonged to the singing school of dazzling detail, close-up scrutiny, and flawlessly executed enactment—tenets his poetry, with its vision of Canada as a “snow-eyed country/jabbed with plenty,” embodied. But trendier, anecdotal styles were now being adopted, styles van Toorn dismissed as “laziness on a typewriter.” As he saw it, poetry was an art of the senses. It flourished best, and enjoyed its most exceptional breakthroughs, when you fixed your eyes on the world and found words precise enough to evoke it. How to make others see that too? An essay might help, yet van Toorn set out for something bigger: a rival canon.

To strike a death blow against the prose-flattened cadences that held sway, van Toorn decided to pretend they never existed. He imagined how Canadian poetry would look if linguistic rigor had played a greater, and earlier, role in elevating one poem over another and began work on an anthology that conjured this alternate world, one predicated on a “rhetoric of particulars.” Van Toorn read everything he could find, starting in the nineteenth century, in which he believed the story he wanted to tell about Canadian poetry took root. From that old-growth forest, he bushwhacked his way into the early decades of the twentieth century, forded the 1940s and 1950s, fanned out across the 1960s, and finally arrived back at his own contemporary clearing. With every inch of ground crossed, van Toorn discovered carelessly neglected, fugitive writing: elemental incantations, panegyrics to beasts, pastoral tales fizzing with energy. Completed in 1973, Mainstream made room for the occasional chestnut (such as Archibald Lampman’s “Heat”), but most of its inclusions were unexpected, often strange. It was a version of literary history few would have recognized. Shock was, in large part, the point. By being ruthlessly selective—hunting through nearly a century of verse for a specific type of poetry, then linking the examples as evidence—van Toorn hoped to reaffirm a major but disregarded current, or mainstream. He hoped, in other words, to change how Canadians wrote poems.
Mainstream never appeared in print. After publishers rejected the manuscript, a crestfallen van Toorn mothballed it. (The preface surfaced in a 1985 volume of essays, which is how I learned about the project.) No record exists to explain why it was turned down, though it’s not hard to picture editors being baffled by the thought experiment. Instead of a useful survey, they were handed a regrettable aberration. But Mainstream was far from a mistake. It wasn’t even that rare. Van Toorn’s lost book belongs, in fact, to a category of anthologizing we might call counterfactual.

Counterfactualism is having a bit of a moment. From a dystopian television drama about a triumphant Nazi Germany ruling the world alongside Japan (The Man in the High Castle), to a blockbuster sci-fi thriller featuring technology that can rewrite human history (Tenet), to a best-selling novel that follows Hillary as she dumps Bill and eventually becomes President of the United States (Rodham), revisionist guesswork is on the rise. It’s practically impossible to keep tabs on all the historians, philosophers, podcasters, bloggers, YouTubers, and video game designers who now work the trick of spinning vividly embellished scenarios from circumstances that never occurred. There are pocket universes where the Persians conquered Greece, where Pilate called off Christ’s crucifixion, where the Black Death wiped out Europe, where the South routed the North, and where John F. Kennedy survived his assassination. Academics have weighed in with a clutch of books that ponder what it means for so many to want to imagine things other than how they are. The trend, argues Catherine Gallagher in her ample study of counterfactualism, Telling It Like It Wasn’t (2018), stems from how it makes history “not only solid and substantial but also suspenseful and unsettled.” Counterfactuals, we’re made to realize, are used in politics, urban planning, climate science, policy making, and financial risk assessments—indeed, in any analysis that requires a nuanced grasp of choices not taken. There is another area, too rarely appreciated, where counterfactuals are central: poetry.

The might-have-been is woven into the way poems project us into the past; but brooding on unintended consequences is also often how the art makes sense of its own history. When we have a literary marketplace in constant flux, where rankings tack to every shift in the tides, counterfactuals keep us honest about the interaction of large and small causes and their unpredictable outcomes. In his essay “Oblivion,” Donald Justice tells the story of a “ridiculous error” that may have consigned Henri Coulette—a major poet in the making, Justice believes—to a premature limbo. In 1971, nearly the entire run of Coulette’s second collection was accidently shredded by his publisher before copies could be widely distributed. It was never reprinted, and Coulette never recovered—it was his last book. Wondering about how everything could have changed for him, and maybe for American poetry, if Coulette had been on the right side of that shredder is more than idle speculation. It reminds us that the episodes that shape a

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period are both simple and unfathomable. Reputations happen, or don’t. One oeuvre is celebrated, not another. Plaudits and prizes suggest a career is rocketing away, only for it to wind up skidding to a stop. “There is a randomness in the operation of the laws of fame that approaches the chaotic,” Justice writes. Unquestioning trust in those laws can make us prone to what psychologists call hindsight bias, or the tendency to accept a received narrative—the apostolic succession of Great Poet to Great Poet, say—as inevitable, as something bound to happen. But for poets and critics homesick for a different reality, and who can’t help but judge poetic developments through the context of what might have happened, an anthology offers the perfect what-if test site.

Setting aside the specialist jobs (poems about weddings or dogs), anthologies tend to do one of three things. They uphold an epochal vision, sift the best from the present, or hawk trends. Each approach exists on what the editor and publisher Michael Schmidt calls a “spectrum.” From the fattest Norton guide at one extreme to the most cutting-edge grouping of “new” voices at the other, most anthologies are gradations along an agreed-upon literary-historical line, parts of a single “contiguous and interdependent” conversation. But a smaller subset don’t see themselves as part of that continuity. They don’t endorse, but disavow. They don’t chart change, they goad it. And they do this by assailing deep-seated assumptions about what we read and what we don’t. Just as counterfactual historians plot the effects of pivotal events deflected from their known course, counterfactual anthologists explore how a literary map might have changed shape if different tendencies—a keener interest in form, say, or a lower tolerance for lackluster diction—had gained purchase. The counterfactual as a problem-solving tool first caught on with eighteenth-century military strategists who would replay battlefield decisions during training to prepare troops for every contingency. Similarly, counterfactual anthologists marshal poems in ways that generate new canonical scenarios. And they, too, are prepping for combat: to replace one idea about poetry with another.

This was the task on which van Toorn was hell-bent. At a time when complacent free verse dominated the Canadian scene and it was difficult to envisage any other kind of poetry, he wanted to deliver a powerful reminder that better options—options largely undreamed of by colleagues—existed. Instead, plain style carried the day, virtually unopposed, for at least another two decades. Regime change, in fact, had to wait until the late 1990s, when *les jeunes* began asking hard questions about the poems they were expected to admire and emulate. Could van Toorn have picked that fight sooner? We’ll never know. But if *Mainstream* tantalizes as a missed opportunity, it’s because counterfactual anthologies have proven extraordinarily effective at winning the contest for aesthetic values and steering the practice of poetry.

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The first high point of the franchise is arguably Ezra Pound’s 1914 Des Imagistes, which, by teaching poets to whittle down superfluity to the “luminous detail,” set the ground rules for Imagism. Among the early interventionist acts that stand out, two are from Britain—The New Apocalypse (1939), which created a bull run on darkly surrealistic, “anti-cerebral” evocations, and New Lines (1956), which defined the tact, clarity, and discipline by which a group called The Movement overhauled British poetry. Anxious to extend the expectations of what poetry could do, each anthology campaigned on the counterfactual promise that the choice it represented would outperform competing modes. In other words, each told a story about where they believed everything went wrong, and what was possible if another set of protocols ran the show. Whether it was The New Apocalypse promoting a vision of man “as a complete living organism,” or New Lines calling for an approach “empirical in its attitude,” poets were invited to compare their depleted imaginative circumstances against the alternate world on offer. With the former, it was a world where language tapped into potent and primal energies; with the latter, where language cut deeper, sharper. The what-ifs started as a mental exercise but ended as a radicalizing force. For a time, each hypothetical dislodged a ruling orthodoxy. Our poems, counterfactualists contend, aren’t immune to the aesthetic ideas we carry around. Instead, those ideas are everything. Change the idea, change the poem.

The anthology that employed revisionist thinking to spectacular ends was Donald Allen’s The New American Poetry (1960). Allen’s task was formidable. He was advocating for a shunned generation of hipsters, loners, disaffiliates, bohemians, mystics, and yawpers—the underclass of the literary establishment. How do you get readers to contemplate, never mind cherish, a product they would otherwise avoid? And what if winning them over depends on them reassessing everything they were told about the state of American poetry? For Allen, what needed reassessing was a narrative whose fealty to classroom-ready formalism and New Critical pieties had, he believed, driven unconventional poems into the wilderness. How do you undo all that? One way is to redo it: start again, from scratch. Script a parallel universe purged of the musical phrases and stanzaic bijouterie of academic verse. The 454-page counterfactual, with its cast of some forty poets all writing in radically bardic ways, became a sensation. As it burned through printing after printing, it brought an unknown cluster of experimental creeds—the Beats, the New York School, Black Mountain—into the mainstream.

It’s hard to think of a provocation that could have matched the impact of The New American Poetry. Broadsides, manifestos, hit pieces—these can help establish a beachhead. But, as we’ve seen, successful counterfactualizing doesn’t just call into question an entrenched line of development. It also gives rise to the very alternative time line it dwells on. A striking example is Al Alvarez’s The New Poetry (1962). At the time, Alvarez was weighing up the consequences of what he considered British poetry’s disastrous turn towards a stifling diffidence, or “gentility,” following the Second World War. He was also weighing up the fact that American poets like Robert Lowell and John Berryman hadn’t suffered any failure of confidence. The boldness and artistry of their
example gave Alvarez his counterfactual. What if his compatriots had decided not to look away from the world? What if, instead, they had discovered forms able to register “nakedly, and without evasion” the “forces of disintegration” in the post-Holocaust, Cold War era? Such a path, Alvarez posited, would have allowed a richer, and thrillingly rawer, range of emotional experience. Prose—incisive, confrontational prose—gave him one way to address the question, anthropologizing another. He rounded up twenty poets, among them Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn, whose explorations of tormented psychological states exemplified the road not taken he favored. Had Alvarez merely staged the revised imaginative conditions needed for his coveted “poetry of extremes,” The New Poetry would still have been an interesting document. Instead, Alvarez pulled off something bigger: he created an appetite for that poetry, reshaping Britain’s aesthetic aspirations for decades.

Counterfactualizing, as should be clear by now, is platform agnostic—it can be practiced by any camp. And if you plan to become a student of this approach, you will need to get comfortable marveling at ventures that contain writing you don’t really warm to. (James Dickey’s description of Donald Allen’s selections as “aggressive gabble” seems about right.) Still, there’s no ignoring that, over the last century, many of our opinions about poetry, if not entire systems of reading and writing the stuff, can be traced back directly to these anthologies. Allen’s principal insight—that experimental poems can find audiences outside of what Charles Bernstein called “Official Verse Culture”—is now a fundamental part of avant-garde mythmaking, both in the United States and abroad. And Al Alvarez’s “gentility principle” continues to be both a touchstone and talking point in British criticism.

When it comes to cracking the secret behind the far-reaching footprint of anthologies like The New American Poetry or The New Poetry, two points come to mind. First, an anthology can wield vastly more influence when it doesn’t adjust for bias, but instead embraces it. Second, that influence springs from an editor’s readiness to impose his will on a body of work—to perform the dissent, as it were, using other people’s poems. Of course, even the most diligently nonpartisan anthology is a form of criticism. Poets are overestimated, or underestimated, or misrepresented in ways that turn them into other kinds of poets—or at least versions that don’t exist anywhere else. And major poets always risk being left out altogether. At their most extreme, anthologies wrench apart well-known signposts of a period. Think of Yeats’s Oxford Book of Modern Verse (1936) and how his vision of modernity couldn’t make room for Dylan Thomas, Wilfred Owen, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, or Wallace Stevens. Or, more recently, The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry (2011) and how Rita Dove’s “buried antipathies” forced her, in a historical conspectus bound for the classroom, to part ways with Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, Donald Justice, and Thom Gunn, among many others.

But while Yeats and Dove modify the canon according to their lights, they don’t offer a provocative glimpse of universes located sideways from the existing one. An anthology stocked with badly showcased poets is still an anthology that sees itself as a mirror of poetical history; it has merely decided to reflect different aspects of it. Instead, counterfactualists place real poets
inside fictional worlds, worlds where all the bad tendencies have been wished away, freeing up room for something new. What’s created isn’t a palliative fantasy. It’s a way of getting the era’s taste-making apparatus to welcome what it never properly considered. If you believe the gatekeeping ideas that award recognition are too narrow, then a counterfactual anthology can wedge that gate a little wider. “Poetry is like a man,” wrote the English poet Keith Douglas in 1940, “whom thinking you know all his movements and appearance you will presently come upon in such a posture that for a moment you can hardly believe it a position of the limbs you know.” But that moment won’t happen until readers are given an incentive to rethink patterns of cause and effect, so that they are open to the possibility that the aesthetic choices everyone avoided can lead to poems just as pleasurable as the aesthetic choices they already trust. At their best, these anthologies have a knack for making the unrealized feel necessary, natural, logical. They might spark heated debate, even derision. But we judge them, ultimately, by how persuasively they construct their trial genealogies and how attractive the substitute outcome is made to appear.

When they succeed, counterfactual anthologies become their own fork in the path, an unforeseen twist that decisively alters a course of action, like the fog that rolled into Brooklyn Heights in late August 1776 and allowed Washington’s battered army to escape the British. But the effects of counterfactual anthologies go even deeper: they betray the makeshift reality of the reputation game. When readers in 1962 closed their copy of *The New Poetry*, they rejoined a poetry establishment that, for all its institutional trappings, was no less fabricated than the *pléiade* Alvarez had assembled for them. It may not have seemed so, certainly. But if a generation appears self-evident, it’s because many hands shaped the material so that the same careers bulked large. To wonder what would have happened had those hands shaped a different story doesn’t discount intrinsic merit. Instead, the question forces us to see literary history as a series of close decisions. It’s easy to fall back on the belief that the elect win out because they are optimized for success. Counterfactual anthologies make it harder. In his essay on Witter Bynner—a poet lauded during the first half of the twentieth century, now largely forgotten—Richard Wilbur complains that canons beget a mass withering of curiosity, a lazy contentment with big names, and a poor appreciation of the long odds faced by gifted, sometimes irreplaceable, poets. It’s vital, he argues, that “lecturers” not lose touch with “the variety and precanonical incertitude of our literary past.”

“Precanonical incertitude” is something chastened anthologists try to keep alive, even when not pursuing a counterfactual. “I have found myself piecing together the record of an adventure, or series of adventures, in search of reality,” wrote Allen Curnow in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Poetry* (1945). It was a reality, he continued, “as manifold as the signs we follow and the routes we take.” Forty years later, Ian Wedde, the co-editor of *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1985), felt no differently. “What is called ‘New Zealand poetry’ is thus a process, not a national condition.” The realization that un-followed signs and routes can generate multiple counter-canons, many with a plausible claim on our attention, can make it difficult for restless critics to leave well enough alone. It’s why Donald Davie proposed rewiring the native English-language tradition through Hardy rather than Yeats or Eliot. And why Yvor Winters spent much of his career laboring to prove the Elizabethan period should have unfolded in a
dramatically different fashion—elevating Fulke Greville, whom he considered a master, over Philip Sidney, whom he didn’t. And it’s why, forty-eight years ago, Peter van Toorn invented a lineage of Canadian poetry that prized a discredited technical prowess.

What these projects have in common is that they dreamed of restoring something essential to a scene: doubt. Creativity, after all, is itself counterfactual, as it requires us to anticipate the effect of certain decisions over others. And we are often too steeped in our own norms to notice when the formal codes associated with the poetry we write are spent. But one way counterfactual anthologies try to change the game is by showing where the existing rules fall short. They remove the veil of significance from an established practice and expose it for what they believe it actually is: the dead grammar of a convention. The tactic won’t work on everyone, but it doesn’t need to. The point is to feed uncertainty. And where does uncertainty often lurk but at the writing desk? Large-scale realignments of taste, when they happen, start small. They start with poets suddenly second-guessing themselves, their confidence crumbling in the face of unfamiliar but invigorating sounds that infiltrate their style until what seemed authentic appears absurd. As Earle Birney eventually came to understand in “Bushed”—one of the poems van Toorn hoped would help create an alternative reality that could haunt Canadian poetry—“by now he could only/ bar himself in and wait/ for the great flint to come singing into his heart.”

Carmine Starnino’s most recent book is Dirty Words: Selected Poems 1997–2016 (Gaspereau Press).