Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction

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Catherine Gallagher. *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction*. University of Chicago Press, 2018. Paperback. 359 pp. $35. ISBN 9780226512419.

CATHERINE Gallagher is Professor Emerita of English at the University of California, Berkeley. In her distinguished career, she has become best known as one of the leading contemporary figures associated with New Historicism, a school of literary criticism that seems to work quite naturally with a study of alternate history and counterfactual thought. *Telling It Like It Wasn't* is the culmination of lengthy research project, bringing together arguments initially laid out in articles such as "War, Counterfactual History, and Alternate-History Novels" (*Field Day Review* 3 (2007): 52-65) and "What Would Napoleon Do? Historical, Fictional, and Counterfactual Characters" (*New Literary History* 42 (Fall 2011): 315-36). It is an important and timely text which broadens our thinking about counterfactual thought beyond the alternate history novel, military history essay, and political hypothesis to encompass theological thought, philosophical proposition, and legal argument.

Gallagher begins by presenting the long-history of counterfactual thought, pausing only briefly to acknowledge then discard the most commonly cited first example: the Roman writer Livy. Instead, she chooses to truly begin her account of the history of alternate history with Gottfried Leibniz. Gallagher argues that, with his ardent belief in God's Providence, Leibniz is not the preventer of counterfactualism which he is more conventionally portrayed as, but that in fact his "apparently paradoxical theorization of contingent imminent historical causes as *the basis of* divine supervision" is one of the first significant developments in counterfactual thought (17, emphasis in original). God, Leibniz argues in his *Theodicy* (1710), sees all possibilities of all timelines and selects for us the best possible route. Hence, when some disaster befalls us we must have faith that it is part of a divine plan to a better reality. From this new foundation stone, Gallagher demonstrates the construction of counterfactual thought as a tool in theology and philosophy, via amongst others

Voltaire and D'Israeli, to its deployment as a tool in critical military history. Here, Gallagher argues, counterfactual thought becomes truly established as a legitimate method of analysis and reflection, culminating in Carl von Clausewitz's various discussions in his treatise on the nature of warfare: *On War* (1832). "Military historians are at ease with counterfactualism," she writes, "because wars are notoriously full of unpredictable turning points, meeting the counterfactualists' need for contingency and multiple possibilities, and yet they have unusually long-range and widespread ramifications" (27). This remains true today with battles and wars providing the background material, if not the entire subject matter, for a vast array of essays by historians and analysts, as well as novels and short pieces by authors of fiction.

Gallagher's history of counterfactualism is pleasing in its scope and the breadth of its sources, taking in early tabletop war games, through to the use of counterfactual arguments in law and political debate. This wide-ranging familiarity with the historical sources, non-fiction counterfactual essays and experiments, and the political and cultural contexts in which each piece was created follows through to her discussion of fictional texts in the subsequent chapters. Gallagher introduces an interesting distinction to her terminology when discussing counterfactual thought in fiction. In line with most scholarship on the subject, she retains "counterfactual histories" as the term to discuss analytical essays and speculations, but narrative forms are split into two categories: the "alternate history" and the "alternate-history novel," the distinction being that the alternate history describes "one continuous sequence of departures from the historical record . . . drawing the dramatis personae exclusively from the historical record," whilst alternate-history novels invent "not only the alternative-historical trajectories but also fictional characters" (3). She later gestures towards the reader's possible confusion at this distinction when she writes that "the word 'novel' may be losing this precision of meaning, but this study will insist on its retention" (325).

These distinctions in place, Gallagher's next chapter charts the changes in counterfactual thought through the nineteenth-century, taking particular note of the rise of the novel in France, the United States, and England. However, the remaining text is largely split into analyses of texts in two thematic categories: those, by American authors, which imagine scenarios where the Union loses the American Civil War, and those, by British authors, which imagine scenarios in which Britain is occupied by Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Limiting the pool of writers

to those native to the country in question limits Gallagher's discussion somewhat by removing some particularly interesting texts, but it also allows the author to avoid the risk of undermining her central argument that these counterfactual scenarios are being written in response to some cultural or political shift or event contemporary to the writer. For example, that writers in the Jim Crow era saw that "the racial situation in the South was so bad that it could not have been worse and *would have been better* if the Confederate states had seceded" (113, emphasis in original), reflected disillusionment with the war's outcome because though free, the former slaves were now subject to terrible conditions and laws which were also rapidly being normalised in the Northern states. In effect, Gallagher argues, these writers were easily able to imagine that the North had lost the Civil War because it felt to them like they actually had.

The resulting volume presents a very neatly packaged argument for the relevance and critical worth of counterfactual thought in both historical writing and narrative fiction, with no snobbishness about science fiction's role in this process, but also an awareness of its deeper roots. If anything, it sometimes feels almost too neat, a result of Gallagher's precise calibration of texts to contexts with each author carefully orientated to appear as a reflection of their time and place. As is so often the case with such arguments, it leads us to wonder about the authors who write similar material in different places, or those writers who are perhaps old-fashioned in their approaches (writing in the mode of the previous generation) or indeed ahead of their time. Yet this is a minor complaint in an otherwise excellent discussion of alternate history and counterfactualism.