place. Maybe it wasn't so bad? In this context, it is tempting to simply throw in the towel on the historical counterfactual—turn away from historical arguments altogether in order to make positive claims that invite different kinds of debates. Perhaps by turning away from history and toward value? aspiration? utopia? I am not making a strong argument here; I am simply sharing the concerns that this book helped crystallize for me—concerns about the difficulty of using history in claims about the future.

Needless to say, none of these questions constitute a criticism of *Telling It Like It Wasn't*. On the contrary, by defining this mode and offering its genealogy, Gallagher makes clear its ubiquity and power. As in her previous work, she shows us how fictions educate our feelings and provide us with important tools for thought. At a moment when the very idea of historical truth is so wholly under attack, I simply wish to raise a question as to the risks we may run when we invoke it.

Note

1. Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn't*, 5. All subsequent references are noted parenthetically in the text.

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Reading Counterfactually

AYELET BEN-YISHAI

IN thinking about Catherine Gallagher's *Telling It Like It Wasn't*, let us first consider three almost random, and definitely unrelated, examples:

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Example #1:
The final episode of the FX drama *The Americans* ends in a small, personal counterfactual, where a character ruminates on what their life would have been had they not [spoiler redacted]. This counterfactual is limited to the fictional history of this one character but it also subtly does something else; it prompts us to read the entire series counterfactually, to zoom out, or pull back, and ask ourselves the big questions the series has never directly posed, and that we the viewers—who know the history of how it all turns out—could not help but repeatedly ask: What could (or would) the latter half of the twentieth century have been had we not been invested in that violent exercise in futility that was the Cold War?

Example #2:
Gallagher ends *Telling it Like it Wasn't* by commenting that in Kate Atkinson's 2014 *Life After Life* (and by extension every other counterfactual on World War II) "what seems to remain unimaginable is the possibility of twentieth-century England in a world without that war." That's a pretty powerful way to end this remarkable and remarkably dense book, for many reasons. I only want to point out that in saying that a twentieth century without World War II is *un*imaginable, Gallagher imagines it into being. Not historically, of course, but counterfactually. In other words, what this last sentence does is read the history of counterfactuals *counterfactually*.

Example #3 is a story of a seminar I teach on the literature of the South Asian partition to my Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian students at the University of Haifa, where our own troubled and troubling past and present haunts our reading of the novels to the point where it takes over, problematically rendering the South Asian partition as a mere counterfactual to our own partition-that-wasn't.

All three of these examples are of texts that, unlike those Gallagher discusses in the book, are *not* counterfactuals, but are read—by us—counterfactually. Under the title "Reading counterfactually" I include various modes of reading in which the text (especially when it is a historical novel) is not a counterfactual in and of itself but is read as a counterfactual of one's own history (and sometimes present) or of another history (or present) usually represented in another text—what we call working comparatively.

What I'm suggesting is that a) reading counterfactually is far more common than we might have noticed; that b) all of us who read

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comparatively are probably doing so in one way or another; and that c) *Telling It Like it Wasn't* offers us much insight into the allures and the possibilities of doing so. Imagining a more just future is one of these allures; another is a way of thinking through our own political/historical problems in ways in which we are not already complicit. In other words, when reading comparatively and/or counterfactually, we displace our own problems onto another context, allowing us to think of them—perhaps more clearly—as someone else's. However, *Telling It Like It Wasn't* also highlights the pitfalls of this mode, not the least of which is that the alternate history loses its historical specificity and contingency to become a mere foil—a counterfactual—for our own.

This reduction is even more complicated when the text under discussion is fictional, and is thus also in a complicated epistemological relationship with the history it purports to represent. After all, history and fiction deal with contingency in different ways, as Gallagher has shown here and elsewhere. Novelistic fiction is dependent on the *could have been* and in so doing retains the multiplicity of contingency. In other words, it is the particular quality of fiction that it retains within it—hovering above, underneath, and just to the side of what actually happens in the novel—everything else that did not, but that could have happened, or would likely have happened.

If reading history counterfactually veers toward the reductive, then reading historical fiction in the same way can be even more so, reducing the probabilistic—and hence inherently multiple—truth of fiction to the danger of a single story (with apologies for quoting Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie out of context). This—as Gallagher shows—comes under special tension in the historical novel, in which the novelistic ability to contain contingency (via the could-have-been would-have-been of its fictionality) is in tension with history's pull to tell the one story that really happened, as it actually happened. It's the danger of reading a historical novel *as history*, a problem well-known to anyone who has ever taught one.

If it seems like I'm advocating staying away from counterfactual reading, that is—in fact—not the case. Indeed, reading counterfactually while being a scholar of the novel gives us a vantage point, whereby we recognize the difference between the contingent, the probable, and the actual, as well as understanding how all of these are constructed. Moreover, we recognize the fraught relationship of the actual and the counterfactual, how they are inscribed in each other, and the way they inflect each other. Reading counterfactually can be reductive,

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but doing so critically can give us a glimpse of the way we take part in—are complicit in—writing the actual story implicit in our choice of counterfactuals.

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Feeling Like It Wasn't

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IN "Is There a Problem with Historical Fiction (or with Scott's *Redgauntlet*)?"—an essay, as it happens, on Sir Walter Scott's great counterfactual novel—Harry E. Shaw calls on literary critics more fully to register "the remarkable variety of things history can do in novels, by short-circuiting the assumption that the representation of history in fiction is really always doing the same sort of work, or should be."[1] History might be a source of imaginative energy, a sort of launching pad for a book about timeless truths, as in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* ("ultimately about individual sacrifice and transcendence, not about the French Revolution in the way in which Scott's *Waverley* is about the Forty-Five"); or the past might function as "a pastoral," which is to say, as a field onto which authors project the concerns of their own times, as in *Romola* (depicting problems "in definitively Victorian terms and then project[ing them] back on to Renaissance Italy," where they would have been understood quite differently [176–77]). Or history, what Shaw calls "objective history," might be a work's actual subject (180). An historical novel of this last sort tells it like it was, or tries to. But even that novel is only doing so much, only making *a* use of history. Georg Lukács is therefore wrong in thinking that "a

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