Work Cited

Gallagher, Catherine. *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Response

CATHERINE GALLAGHER

I felt both tremendously honored and slightly alarmed when I learned that this roundtable was being organized. I was delighted that such a stellar group of novel critics was willing to read *Telling It Like It Wasn't* but worried about their reactions to what Deidre Lynch has called the book's "deeply weird materials." Much of the historical substance, especially the military and economic historiography, are far from our usual interests, and many of the literary texts are obscure and ephemeral. Furthermore, I passed over the opportunity to write about the best-known novels (like Philip Roth's *Plot Against America*) by limiting my twentieth-century case studies to American Civil War and British World War II counterfactuals. So I worried that a panel on this eccentric book might seem merely an irrelevant interruption, especially in the context of a meeting of the Society for Novel Studies.

But I should have known that these panelists would welcome the invitation that historical counterfactuals give us to think about what doesn't lie obviously in our field of vision when we glance backwards. Counterfactual writing in both history and fiction, indeed, tends to present itself as an essentially deviant use of the imagination. Its favorite metaphor—the path not taken—consistently figures it as a digression or diversion, a hypothetical departure from the known sequence of things, which is designed to yank our minds off course. These marvelously rich and intelligent reactions to the phenomenon have renewed even my pretty well-sated appetite for the topic. They especially open up three aspects of the phenomenon unnoticed or underexamined by me.

Catherine Gallagher is the Eggers Professor of English Literature, Emerita, at the University of California, Berkeley. Her books include *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: 1832–67* (1985), *Nobody's Story* (1995), *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (2006), and *Telling It Like It Wasn't: the Counterfactual Imagination in History and Literature* (2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150318001390 Published online by Cambridge University Press

First, both Rae Greiner and Nasser Mufti raise the possibility of applying the counterfactual mode to the history of our own field of literary studies. Greiner forthrightly asks if anyone has written counterfactual literary history, a question that at first seems fairly easy to answer by instancing several well-known short stories and essays: Nathaniel Hawthorne's satirical account of Byron and Percy Shelley turning into reactionary Anglicans as they age; Harold Nicolson's fantasy about Byron becoming King of Greece; and J. S. Squire's speculative essay on how our literary history would have been affected if Francis Bacon had been proven to have written Shakespeare's plays. We could also point to Paul Muldoon's 1990 long poem *Madoc: A Mystery*—based on the premise that Robert Southey and S. T. Coleridge made it to America to establish their utopian Pantisocracy—as a literary-historical counterfactual tale. All of those works, though, focus on particular authors, so one might say that they really belong to the genre of counterfactual biography and thus fall beneath the level of world-revising consequentiality. But Greiner is after a more general point. She wonders why all of the book's swirling currents of counterfactual thought do not seem to inspire any adventurous speculative departures in the book's own practice of cultural history.

One possible answer is that the author of this book just isn't very imaginative, but Greiner generously poses the question in the first-person plural: "Why don't *we* do it?" In general, it seems to me that cultural historians seldom practice the kind of counterfactualism described in this book, because we don't often trace very clear causal sequences. The kinds of histories where counterfactuals abound, like military and economic history, are also those most intent on precise causal explanations, whereas the sorts of cultural history we practice often amass causal factors—of authors and texts, genres and aesthetic movements, media and communicative technology, literacy and audiences, intellectual property and marketplaces—without specifying which were primary, which secondary, which necessary, which sufficient. But that does not mean that, in the course of our usual scholarship, we don't often feel the frisson of encountering alternative histories. Perhaps the imaginative works through which we understand the history of a culture in themselves satisfy our appetite for alternate histories by seeming to stop the flow of time so that we can glimpse successive hopes and fears about possible worlds that have gone unrealized.

Nassar Mufti encourages us to imagine an alternative to the way we have theorized the history of the novel. Suppose our model for thinking

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150318001390 Published online by Cambridge University Press

about the historical novel were informed by C. L. R. James's *Black Jacobins* instead of Georg Lukács's book on the subject. Whereas Lukács made the French Revolution the enabling condition for the historical novel, James's book might have revived a different but equally unprecedented revolutionary moment as the origin of a "mass experience" of history, the Haitian Revolution of 1804. Mufti uses this hypothesis to indicate two ways in which our assumptions about the historical novel would have been different. First, our understanding of the space-time of modernity, out of which the historical novel is said to emerge, would have been radically altered. Instead of being rooted in discrete and geographically defined Western European nation-states, the historical novel might have been recognized as the result of the massive geographical dislocations of the slave trade and its reverberations around the world. The nation-novel dyad would have been shaken by challenging where and when the nation is supposed to find its existence. Second, Mufti uses his hypothesis to interrogate Lukács's account of the requirement for protagonists in historical novels, asking what might have been different if, instead of historical-novel heroes normally being fictional personae of middling moral and social stature, an actual revolutionary had occupied the role. This question unsettles the assumption of the historical novel's fictionality, which, like that of most modern novels, inheres in the invented status of the protagonists, their nobodiness. It can also serve to remind us, though, of both the ontologically mixed nature of many of the historical novel's personae and the subgenre's close kinship to the older form of the romance. And, since many aspects of romance characterization are preserved in alternate-history fictions as well, we might conclude that Mufti's alternate novel theory would bring counterfactual fictions closer to the mainstream variety.

Ayelet Ben-Yishai and Deidre Lynch also examine convergences between counterfactual thinking and the modes we normally use when reading narratives, especially novels. Although they don't speculate about alternative scholarly practices, they use the encounter with explicit counterfactualism to reveal unnoticed ways in which we routinely interact with fictions more generally. Ben-Yishai focuses on our habit of reading almost all narrative comparatively and the tendency for comparison to slip into counterfactualism. When reading (or viewing) realist fictions, we are encouraged to compare their "facts" to the myriad unrealized alternatives that the narratives also reveal. When reading and writing histories, our mode of comprehension is similarly comparative: one nation's history comes into focus in contrast with another's. Indeed, all of our

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150318001390 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narrative comprehension involves some process of credibility checking against our own life experience. The paradox of the combined difficulty and necessity of comparison is an underlying assumption of counterfactual history, which first recognizes that all historical events are unique and thus actual comparisons are intrinsically inaccurate, and then proposes hypothetical thought experiments to remedy the problem of incomparability. Being able to add and subtract various conditions imaginatively in a causal analysis, as one might actually do in a laboratory experiment, is supposed to allow for greater precision than actual similar situations provide.

However, the counterfactual historian must still have some source of evidence for working out the imaginary scenarios, and the evidence often comes from adjacent situations. Ben-Yishai gives the example of the history of the Indian subcontinent standing in for an alternate history of an Israel that undergoes a partition. Counterfactuals thus keep turning into comparisons and vice versa. It is the reductive potential of the latter cases, in which the historical narratives of others become merely allegories of ourselves under alternate circumstances, that worries Ben-Yishai, especially since those allegories are so often chosen to illustrate the superiority of our actuality. It seems, though, that the antidote to this unconscious, habitual counterfactualism is a more self-conscious and critical variety toward which the novel shows the way by tracking the process of "writing the actual story implicit in our choice of counterfactuals."

Deidre Lynch also asks us to consider realist novels, especially historical novels, as exercises in the same sort of logic we use in counterfactual reasoning. But whereas Ben-Yishai wants us to see what is routine in counterfactualism, Lynch wants us to see what is weird in novel reading. When reading both alternate histories and historical novels, for example, we must partly suspend our knowledge of historical outcomes and try to dwell imaginatively in a moment when our own reality might never come into being. Both genres thus require that history seem at once irrevocable (from the readers' temporal vantage point) and open-ended (from the characters'). Moreover, to create the sensation of history-in-the-making, Lynch reminds us, both forms must also revive the experience of what it felt like to live in the expectation of futures ultimately unrealized, which are the very things that the historical record usually sweeps into oblivion. And just as in alternate histories we often view digressions from our timeline as departures from normalcy, so too in historical novels history is estranged by its rendering as an intrusive interruption of private lives (the normal stuff of novels) by public events.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150318001390 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In short, the comparison with alternate-history forms helps us see all that is odd about history in ordinary novels. These various ways of blurring the line between normal novels and counterfactual narratives come together in Lynch's reading of Scott's *Redgauntlet*, where a fictional protagonist almost succeeds in fomenting a third Jacobite rebellion in the 1860s. The example illustrates the remarkable degree to which a historical novel can tilt in the direction of alternate history, but it also shows the impossibility of it finally arriving there. In the end, *Redgauntlet* stays in the genre of the "secret history," where the attempt to alter the course of nations is foiled and disguised as a merely private escapade. Like all boundary lines, the genre of the secret history stands as a reminder of both the proximity and the gap between history and counterfactual history in the novel.

Rachel Ablow and Paul Saint-Amour comment on a third topic: the relation between collective entities and individuals in counterfactual narratives generally. Ablow begins with what seems a personal counterfactual: she tells us she would have read *Telling It Like It Wasn't* very differently if the 2016 election had turned out differently. But we understand that the statement refers not just to an individual speaker's changing perceptions, but to a transformation produced by the collective action of the polity in which she read the book. Our collective reality seems to have changed its fundamental nature and especially to have undermined our ability to come to a common understanding of even the basic facts of our actual history, which impairs the usefulness of counterfactually inspired progressive initiatives like affirmative action and other historical-justice attempts. The problem isn't just that the various sectors of the polity disagree about the actuality on which counterfactuality is based but also that those in charge of our collective reality try to discredit the very idea of seeking historical knowledge through evidence.

Ablow's sense of dread about the future of counterfactualism is thus based on her dread about the future of history more generally, and it leads her to wonder if too many of our hopes for the future might have been insecurely pegged to historical premises that we wrongly believed to have been widely shared. Her comments remind me that I experienced a similar unease when I began trying to understand historical counterfactualism in the decade following the end of the Cold War. I was puzzled by its prevalence in our visions of an enlightened future, many of which seemed limited by the logic of tort law in their desire to undo the effects of past injustices. Ablow suggests that this "back to the future" movement of our political imaginations may have played itself

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150318001390 Published online by Cambridge University Press

out. Moreover, her comments also emphasize that counterfactualism is always both practiced and received within some communal sense of the general direction of history, and she implies that our collective sense of historical orientation was lost in the 2016 election.

Although not explicitly inspired by the 2016 election, Paul Saint-Amour's rumination on what it means to be underdetermined is also concerned with the problem of collectivities and the kinds of protagonists they might become. As he points out, in counterfactual narratives departures from the actual course of history often result from small changes: a single powerful person's last-minute change of mind or the slightly different trajectory of an assassin's bullet. The French called these "petites causes" and used them to show the operations of chance in history. This idea of chancy causality, which theorists of probability find in the 50/50 cases of "equipossibility," is linked by Saint-Amour to the "weak protagonicity" of collective characters in alternate-history narratives. Alternate histories of individual historical persons usually scale up into group or national histories, but, Saint-Amour points out, the agency of the leader isn't usually transferred to the nation as a whole, and even the writers most interested in such a transfer cannot fully imagine how it would be effected.

In modern democracies, the most important historical moments of scalar transfer are elections, when agency is passed in the other direction, from the collectivity of voters to individual leaders. And when such elections are themselves underdetermined, as they were in recent U.S. and British history and as they often are in counterfactual narratives, collective agency seems all the weaker and more easily swayed by random events. Last-minute misinformation campaigns, the unprecedented blunder of a bureaucrat, manipulation by a foreign government, unseasonable rain: the numerous "petites causes" in the 2016 elections are uncannily similar to the odd sorts of things that befall nations in alternate histories and send them off in unexpected directions. Causality in these stories is, thus, weak in two senses; first it chooses turning points both crucial and chancy and then it focuses on collective protagonists, which are often internally divided, uninformed, without adequate decision-making organs, and generally disorganized. In short, they are "underdetermined" in that characterological sense of lacking a defined purpose.

In the fictional narratives, what begins in the thoughtlessness, laziness, or spite of the collective usually ends in the ruin of the nation. The plot, as in the title of Philip Roth's novel, is often *against* the nation. Saint-Amour suggests that the point of this weak collective protagonicity

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150318001390 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is to stimulate a movement toward a more active and knowledgeable kind of citizenship. My own explanation has been that stories of national dismantling are designed to make us cling to what's left of the one we still have: they help us desire our world. In either case, I can certainly envision a continuing role for counterfactual narratives in our current collective life.

In conclusion, I want to thank the panelists for entering into the spirit of counterfactual speculation. They read beyond the book's actuality for its unrealized possibilities, and I'm very grateful that they did so.

Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "P's Correspondence." *Mosses from an Old Manse*. New York: Modern Library, 2007.

James, C. L. R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1938.

Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. Boston: Beacon, 1963.

Muldoon, Paul. *Madoc: A Mystery*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992.

Nicolson, Harold. "If Byron Had Become King of Greece." In *If It Had Happened Otherwise*, edited by J. C. Squire. London: Longmans, Green, 1931.

Roth, Philip. *The Plot Against America*. New York: Vintage, 2005.

Scott, Walter. *Redgauntlet*. New York: Oxford World's Classics, 2011.

Squire, J. C. "If It Had Been Discovered in 1930 That Bacon Had Written Shakespeare." In *If It Had Happened Otherwise*, edited by J. C. Squire. London: Longmans, Green, 1931.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150318001390 Published online by Cambridge University Press