ROUNDTABLE: *TELLING IT LIKE IT WASN'T*, BY CATHERINE GALLAGHER

Introduction

DANIEL HACK

CATHERINE Gallagher's importance as a scholar of nineteenth-century British culture and a historian and theorist of the novel makes the appearance of a new monograph by her an event for Victorianists (among others). This is true even when few of the materials she discusses are, strictly speaking, Victorian, as is the case with her new book, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction*. In *Telling It Like It Wasn't*, Gallagher traces the emergence and development of analytic and narrative discourses premised on counterfactual-historical hypotheses. As the author explains, these hypotheses are past-tense, conditional conjectures "pursued when the antecedent condition is known to be contrary to fact," such as, to take her two major examples, *What if the South won the Civil War?* and *What if the Nazis had invaded Britain?*[1] Bringing together what Gallagher calls "counterfactual histories," which are more analytical than narrative and typically consider multiple unrealized possibilities; works of "alternate history," which describe one continuous sequence of departures from the historical record but draw their dramatis personae exclusively from that record; and "the alternate-history novel, [which] invents not only alternative-historical trajectories but also fictional characters," *Telling It Like It Wasn't* explores the distinctive uses and dynamic interactions of these forms over the past two centuries and considers their implications for our understanding of more conventional fiction and historiography.[2]

Victorian Literature and Culture organized a roundtable discussion of *Telling It Like It Wasn't* at the Society for Novel Studies' 2018 conference, held at Cornell University. What follows are lightly edited versions of the remarks delivered by the roundtable participants, including a response by Catherine Gallagher.

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Notes

1. Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn't*, 2.
2. Gallagher, 3.

Work Cited

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

The Counterfactual in the Age of Trump

RACHEL ABLOW

"IF Hillary Clinton had won the 2016 election . . ." Wouldn't it be nice to climb down into that imaginative rabbit hole and stay there for a while? The possibilities are so reassuringly normal—as opposed to the strange nightmare in which we find ourselves today. For the purposes of this roundtable, however, I wish to consider only one small potential consequence of a Hillary win: and that is what it would have been like to read Catherine Gallagher's new book if Hillary Clinton had won the 2016 election. I would probably have experienced *Telling It Like It Wasn't* as a fascinating intellectual history of a mode or a discourse that has enormous political purchase today, largely as a result of its "affiliation with legal and political historical justice projects."[1] Although thinkers of all political persuasions use this mode, Gallagher explains, the political counterfactual has played a particularly prominent role in "the pressure exerted by the civil rights movement in favor of a Second Reconstruction, affirmative action programs, and claims for reparations" (124–25). It has served as a way to right the wrongs of history, in other words, and as such has served us extremely well. Or, at least, that is how I would have felt if Hillary Clinton had won the 2016 election. But she did not. As a

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