

Narrating the Truth (More or Less)

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While aestheticians have devoted substantial attention to the possibility of acquiring knowledge from fiction, little of this attention has been directed at the acquisition of factual information. This neglect does not stem from a denial that we acquire such information from fictions; it is usually taken for granted that one can learn a great deal about whaling from Melville's *Moby Dick* or about World War I mining from Sebastian Faulk's *Birdsong*. The neglect instead traces, I believe, to the assumption that the task of aesthetics is to explain the *special* cognitive value of fiction. While the value of many works of nonfiction may be measured, in part, by their ability to transmit information, most works of fiction do not have this aim, and so many conclude that the transmission of information is irrelevant to their value.

Contributing to the force of this conclusion are two other common ideas. The first is that the standard aim of fiction—presumably, to give us a good story—is in direct conflict with the acquisition of factual knowledge. Since real events do not follow neat narrative structures, writing a good story might seem to oblige a few of Huck Finn's "stretchers": departures from the (sometimes tedious) truth. The second idea is that the acquisition of factual knowledge is a trivial achievement—something like memorizing a list of factoids—which does not require a process as interesting as imaginative engagement with fiction. Taken together, these ideas suggest that the transmission of such knowledge is unlikely to illuminate the special significance we attribute to great works of fictional literature. Thus aestheticians look at other features of fiction to account for its cognitive significance: for instance, the capacity to encourage empathetic responses, develop imaginative skills, improve counterfactual reasoning, or tell us "what it is like" to be in a given situation.

I am skeptical of all these claims. I doubt that there is *any* value, cognitive or otherwise, special to all and only works of fiction. I am skeptical that we can even demarcate the class of "all and only works of fiction." When we consider works whose classification is difficult or controversial—such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and Edmund Morris's *Dutch*—drawing a sharp line between the ones located in the fiction aisle and the ones on the opposite wall seems a useless occupation. Surely it is part of the value of *War and Peace* that it provided, at the time it was written, the most accurate account of Napoleon's invasion of Russia available. Determining the cognitive value—or, rather, values—of a work of fiction is not something that can be accomplished in advance of considering the particular work in question.

Thus I see no reason to neglect the capacity to convey factual information—specifically, propositional knowledge about real individuals and events—when assessing the value of particular works. The value of this capacity depends on the worth of the information itself. There is a genuine question about why we place so much value on knowing what has happened, both lately and in the past; but it is clear that we *do* value this knowledge. If this knowledge is valuable, and we acquire it from certain works of fiction, then those works possess an important kind of cognitive value.

In this paper I consider the value of learning about history from a particular work of fiction, Gore Vidal's *Lincoln: A Novel*, with the aim of casting doubt on the claims mentioned above. I choose this text because its author, like Tolstoy, is explicit about his intention to provide an accurate account of the relevant historical period (Vidal 1993).

Drawing on recent work in cognitive psychology, I argue that narrative devices used by Vidal can *enhance* our ability to learn and retain factual information, despite also increasing the possibility that we will form false beliefs; that the information thereby attained is nothing like a list of trivial factoids; and that acquiring propositional knowledge from fiction, far from being a process we can take for granted, constitutes a difficult achievement. The experimental results I discuss raise important questions in aesthetics and epistemology. Though I will not have the space to answer them here, I hope to convince you that these questions warrant further investigation.

In the next section I describe Vidal's novelistic technique. In §2 I provide a sketch of how we learn from texts, and in §3 and §4 I use this model to examine the potential rewards and risks of acquiring beliefs from *Lincoln*. Finally, in §5, I turn to the broader theoretical questions posed by these results.

Let me emphasize that my focus on factual information is not meant to imply that this is the only sort of knowledge one can acquire from fiction. And of course there are *other* types of information that one can glean from more standard works of nonfiction that one could not pick up from *Lincoln*: for instance, knowledge of the particular sources used. Moreover, as David Davies and Ivan Gaskell have emphasized to me, many works of nonfiction provide a sense of the practice of history, the methodologies and problems that arise in trying to understand the past, which would be out of place in this novel. Though these are all important sorts of cognitive value, I focus solely on the more neglected topic of factual information.

§1. Narrative Technique in Lincoln

In Vidal's novel, the story of Lincoln's presidency is told by a third-person omniscient narrator who has "inside views" of what real people are thinking—though the "omniscience" does not extend to Lincoln's own mental processes. This aspect of Vidal's narrative technique is most appropriately compared to that of Henry James. In both cases the authors reflect the story through "centers of consciousness," characters to whose thoughts and experiences we are privy; we learn about events from their perspectives while the narrator remains effaced: except that in the case of *Lincoln*, these characters are real. We get inside views, for example, of Mary Todd Lincoln, John Hay (Lincoln's secretary), Salmon P. Chase (Secretary of the Treasury), William Seward (Secretary of State), and David Herold (a conspirator in the assassination).

Here is a passage that occurs following the first mention of Ulysses S. Grant, after he led the Union's first victory in the war at Shiloh. James Garfield has just remarked to John Hay and Kate Chase (the Treasury Secretary's daughter) that General Pope is the Union's best general in the West:

"Better than Grant?" asked Hay, genuinely curious. He could not make up his mind which set of generals was worse—the West Pointers who had spent their careers making money in the railroad business or the politicians on horseback, looking for renown. Although Grant was a West Pointer, he had gone into the saddlery business, where he had attractively failed.

"He's a better all-round general than Grant. But Grant is best in the field. I know you disapprove, Miss Kate, of how he never lets up but that's the way it's done. The two sides lost more men at Shiloh than were ever before lost in a single day of modern warfare. That was because Grant would not retreat, even though the rebels had the advantage."

In Chase's study, Pope was saying the opposite. "Grant is hopeless. When not drunk, he is in a sort of stupor. At Shiloh, he was surprised by the enemy. He was unprepared. He barely survived. He is no general. But then McClellan's worse." (Vidal 1984: 346)

It takes a certain sophistication to recognize that the final sentence of the first paragraph continues Hay's train of thought, because it employs free indirect discourse, a novelistic means of representing thoughts through third-person narration. Perhaps no other technique has been more closely associated with fiction than privileged access to the private thoughts of characters. Because the writer of a work of nonfiction could not possibly have such access to the minds of other people, histories and biographies standardly present the thoughts of real individuals as inferences from the evidence. And they provide information about their evidential sources. This is by contrast with Vidal's narration, which provides the reader with fictional, seemingly *direct* access to the thoughts of certain characters.

Lincoln does more, though, than manipulate the points of view from which we learn about events; it also changes some known facts about how events unfolded. In different terms, Vidal distorts the *subject matter* of his narrative, that is, the real events and individuals he describes. Vidal invents some minor characters. He creates a history for one of the real conspirators in the assassination, David Herold, because very little is known about his early life. He also changes the chronology of a few events. On the other hand, when it comes to those parts of the narrative that directly concern Lincoln, Vidal claims to be as reliable as any traditional biographer. Lincoln is never even in the same room as the few invented characters, and no changes are made in the chronology of his activities. Similarly, we get information about Lincoln's thoughts and perspectives only through quotations of his words and inferences from other evidence.

Although Vidal's portrait of Lincoln has generated controversy, this is not because Vidal lacks evidence for his claims. In addition to his own extensive studies of primary and secondary sources, Vidal employed a researcher to correct any mistakes about "agreed-upon facts"—the public information that is not in debate among historians (Vidal 1993: 675). He also consulted with Lincoln scholar David Herbert Donald, who, eleven years later, wrote an acclaimed biography of Lincoln. Vidal details his fictionalizations in the Afterword to the novel, where he describes as "urgent" the question, "How much of *Lincoln* is generally thought to be true? How much made up?" and states that he will provide "as straight an answer as the writer can give" (Vidal 1984: 659). He goes on to say that all of the major historical figures are "reconstructed ... from letters, journals, newspapers, diaries, etc.," and that they "said and did pretty much what [he has] them saying and doing." Of course, the above passage probably does not provide the exact words of Garfield and Pope; and a reader would have to know something about Vidal's method to know that information about these conversations likely came from Hay's and Chase's diaries. Still, in several exchanges with critics, Vidal has brought such sources forward to defend the statements in the novel.

In what follows I assume that Vidal is as reliable as he claims to be, that is, that he is reliable with respect to everything he does not purposely fictionalize. What I have just said may not be enough to convince you that he is reliable. But if it turns out that he is not, this will be for reasons no different from those that make authors of standard nonfiction works unreliable. The assumption of reliability therefore allows us to concentrate specifically on the cognitive effects of the intended fictionalizations.

§2. Learning from a Text

To understand what effects Vidal's narrative approach might have on our learning from *Lincoln*, it is useful to have a model of learning from a text. Think of this process as involving two stages. The first stage consists in comprehending the text; if you don't understand what you're reading, there's no chance you will learn anything. Cognitive psychologists distinguish recall of the propositions in the text from genuine comprehension, which results in a mental representation of the situation the text is *about*, usually called a *situation model* (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983) or *mental model* (Johnson-Laird 1983). Readers who perform best on measures of comprehension are those who are most active in making inferences that integrate prior knowledge with incoming information, thus developing the most elaborated, coherent situation models (McNamara et al. 1996; Vidal-Abarca et al. 2000; Voss and Silfies 1996; Narvaez et al. 1999). The second stage of learning from a text consists in the integration of new information in the situation model into long-term belief structures so that it can be accessed and applied in other contexts. In most cases readers *incorporate* only some elements of the situation model into their beliefs, while *compartmentalizing* others—that is, keeping these elements restricted to the situation model derived from the text (Potts and Peterson 1985; Potts et al. 1989).

The important point for my purposes is that the way we store new information in memory at the second stage depends crucially on features of the situation model we develop at the first stage, in comprehension. To learn is not simply to accumulate true beliefs, storing a list of facts in a little black box in the mind. If it were, my computer would know much more than I do. Rather, learning requires the *integration* of new information with old, *organized* so that it can be applied in other contexts.

We can use the passage from *Lincoln* to illustrate. At the most basic level, a reader must keep track of the different points of view in the passage, for instance the fact that the first paragraph represents Hay's thoughts, while Garfield is speaking in the second paragraph. Similarly, to understand the situation described by Garfield, a reader must infer the connection between being "best in the field" and never letting up, which is not made explicit. A more sophisticated level of comprehension requires applying information available earlier in the novel (and elsewhere): that the main problem the Union has faced is the unwillingness of its generals, notably George McClellan, to pursue serious battles. With that information in mind, a reader will understand why, according to Pope, McClellan is still "worse" than Grant. Finally, we should note that most readers of the novel would already know something about Grant. Such background knowledge will immediately be brought to the reader's mind at the first introduction of Grant into the novel, and will necessarily affect the way she processes information from the text. For instance, readers aware of Grant's later successes and eventual promotion to commander of the Union armies will have to reconcile this information with the varying opinions presented by characters in the novel. They will come to understand the ways in which Grant was viewed by his contemporaries, and will draw conclusions about which contemporaries were more reliable judges.

It turns out that readers who make more inferences in developing a mental representation at the first stage are more likely to incorporate elements of the situation model with other beliefs at the second (Potts et al. 1989). And the better the situation model developed during reading, the more likely we will integrate information into our long-term beliefs in ways that make the information accessible in new contexts. This is because the situation model will already contain connections to the reader's other beliefs, which are then carried over into long-term memory. This process relies on features of both reader and text. A reader who already knows something about Grant, and who keeps in mind relevant information from preceding sections of the text, will engage in the sort of active inferential processing that facilitates learning and retention. By contrast, a reader who knew nothing

about Grant prior to reading the text would not be able to engage in some of the inferential processes I have described. And had the text spelled out certain connections, the reader would not need to make certain inferences herself and would therefore have been less likely to integrate the new information. I will argue that *Lincoln* possesses many characteristics that prompt the type of inferences that result in new information's being integrated with other beliefs in long-term memory.

To the extent that the situation models readers develop in comprehending *Lincoln* are accurate representations of the real world, this result is exactly what we should want. As we have seen, however, the text is not entirely true, and thus arises what I will call the *epistemic risk* of learning from the novel. For readers to avoid forming false beliefs, they must be selective about which elements of the situation model to incorporate and which to compartmentalize. In the next section I consider the comprehension stage, explaining how Vidal's narrative technique facilitates the construction of better situation models. In the following section I consider the attendant epistemic risks.

§3. Cognitive Rewards

A growing body of research in psychology indicates that certain narrative devices often associated with fiction—though increasingly with nonfiction—improve readers' comprehension and retention of information. The obvious difference between *Lincoln* and standard biographies is the manipulation of the point of view from which we learn about events. *Lincoln* plunges us directly into the flow so that we “see” the president in action: we learn about Lincoln through the eyes and minds of people close to him, rather than from Vidal's real retrospective point of view. It turns out that this shift in perspective generates numerous epistemic advantages, which I will briefly outline.

One advantage is that such eyewitness descriptions are more likely to be *concrete*, which means that they generate more imagery, and this in turn seems significantly to enhance memorability. Experiments in which abstract texts were revised to contain more concrete language measured a substantial increase in readers' recall performance (see esp. Sadoski, Goetz, and Rodriguez 2000). Getting the story from the point of view of particular characters also prompts vicarious experiences in the reader, creating more personal and emotional engagement, for instance through identification with particular characters (see Wade 1992). Increasing personal engagement has a direct effect on text comprehension. The more involved a reader is, the more likely she is to engage in the active processing of information that fosters understanding and improves learning.

A related epistemic advantage of *Lincoln* depends on the *reduction of exposition* afforded by Vidal's technique. Conventional biographies are, as one researcher puts it, “narrative in structure” yet “expository in nature” (Wade 1992: 260). Although biographies recount the events of a person's life, they interrupt the narrative to provide descriptions and background, explanations of causes and consequences, and arguments for interpretations of events. By contrast, Vidal does not “make magisterial judgments or quibble with others in the field” (Vidal 1993: 695). It turns out that narratives display an advantage over expositions in studies of reading comprehension. Expository texts, when they treat unfamiliar topics, prompt subjects to process information as so many separate items to be memorized; in other words, they evoke the behavior associated with cramming for an examination (Vidal-Abarca, Martínez, and Gilabert 2000; Narvaez, van den Broek, and Ruíz 1999). By contrast, narratives prompt readers to focus on the situation the text is about. Readers of *Lincoln* are able to arrive at conclusions about major historical events, not by reading an explanation of those events (“Lincoln did not care as much about slavery as about keeping the Union together”), but by interpreting human behavior (from Lincoln's actions, as witnessed by those

close to him, they infer that he cared less about slavery than the Union). Because these readers will have made the inferences to causes and consequences themselves, they are more likely to remember the information and to put it to use in novel situations (McNamara et al. 1996). And when presented with brand new information in narrative form, they already possess knowledge structures that will help them organize that information (Seely and Long 1994).

Finally, Vidal's presentation of contrasting viewpoints encourages more effective processing of information. "Hay admired Lincoln, Chase hated him, Mary Todd loved him, and so on. Each sees him in a different way, under different circumstances" (Vidal 1993: 695). Given the multiplicity of conflicting perspectives on Lincoln, it is impossible *not* to try to solve the mystery of what makes him tick. So we put a great deal of cognitive effort into understanding this indecipherable individual, meaning that we will remember more than we would otherwise. Researchers investigating how to improve the teaching of history have found that learning from multiple sources leads to deeper comprehension. One reason, suggested by Keith Lehrer, is that having an aggregation of diverse information lends greater support to a conclusion than having only one source. But in addition, having to assess multiple sources promotes problem-solving activities, rather than passive reception (Britt et al. 1999). Thus Vidal enables us to evaluate several different viewpoints in arriving at our own conclusions. The passage above provides an excellent example of this feature: we are provided with three different perspectives on Grant—Hay's, Garfield's, and Pope's—and we must use our own background information and information from throughout the text to decide how to assess Grant's abilities.

To summarize: Vidal's narrative technique in *Lincoln* makes the text more interesting, prompts mental imagery, increases personal and emotional engagement in the story, reduces expository interruptions, and increases active inferential processing. The result is that the reader of *Lincoln* will have a kind of "mental map" of Lincoln's presidency: how policies were formed, what effects they had, who was involved, and so forth. A person with this sort of representation knows more about that slice of history than someone who remembers a series of facts without having a sense of how they hang together.

It is worth pausing over the conclusion one can draw from these results: that the use of techniques designed to make a work a better story—techniques typically associated with fiction—can actually *improve* a reader's capacity to acquire propositional knowledge about historical persons and events. If learning in this sense means integrating information with existing memory structures so that it is accessible in new contexts, then these narrative devices are cognitively valuable to the extent that they facilitate this process. And there is plenty of evidence that they do.

§4. Epistemic Risks

While I have claimed that the techniques used by Vidal enhance *Lincoln's* value as a source of historical knowledge, these cognitive rewards are attended by certain risks. The techniques prompt readers to form better mental representations of Lincoln's presidency and to integrate these representations into their long-term beliefs; in so doing, however, they increase the possibility that readers will form false beliefs. Thus arises the epistemic risk of learning from the novel.

As I have said, Vidal distorts some elements of his subject matter. And this is not just a contingent feature of the novel; Vidal's use of multiple perspectives obliges this type of fictionalization. For example, Vidal does not invent a history for David Herold out of an unmotivated desire to exercise his creativity. Rather, this aspect of the narrative is required by the objective of providing multiple points of view on Lincoln, including the perspective of

those who hated the president enough to conspire in assassinating him. Not too much is known about the conspirators other than John Wilkes Booth, who was a famous actor. But Herold had two important features Booth lacked: he was present in Washington, D.C., during the whole of Lincoln's presidency, so that we can get eyewitness accounts throughout that period; and he is not so well known, which means that readers are more likely to sympathize and thereby come to understand his point of view.

With respect to Vidal's use of privileged access, no reader is likely to believe, in reading *Lincoln*, that she is getting exact transcriptions of the moment-by-moment thoughts of particular real individuals, so there is little danger on this score. Even so, the narrative technique can lead to misunderstanding, as illustrated by Vidal's exchange with the historian Richard Current. Current argued in his review of the novel that Vidal had wrongly "asserted that Ulysses S. Grant 'had gone into the saddlery business where he had attractively failed,'" because, according to Current, "Grant had never gone into the saddlery, harness, or leather-goods business and therefore could not have failed at it. He was only an employee" (Current 1988: 66). I am inclined to agree with Vidal's comment, "This is the sort of thing that gives mindless pedantry a bad name" (Vidal 1993: 691). But Vidal also replies to Current less flippantly. In addition to citing Grant's own writings, as any nonfiction writer defending his interpretation would do, Vidal argues that Current has misunderstood the way novels are written. He points out that the reference to Grant as a failure in the saddlery business is an "idle remark" by John Hay, not an assertion by the author (Vidal 1993: 691). The potential for misunderstanding is obvious, partly because the people through whose eyes and minds Vidal narrates events necessarily have limited information (which is sometimes inaccurate), but also because not every reader is familiar with the relevant narrative devices.

The result is that the cognitive advantages of reading *Lincoln* more or less inevitably carry with them increased epistemic risks. But how likely is it that readers will succumb to these risks? Research into narrative persuasion gives us cause for concern. Sparing the (fascinating) details, the upshot of research in this domain is that readers are more likely to incorporate information that they do not hold up to scrutiny—where "scrutiny" involves assessment of evidence and argument—and that they are more likely to process information from engaging narratives this way (Slater 2002; Green and Brock 2002; Strange 2002; Wheeler et al. 1999). There are two obvious reasons: first, fictions "are not created to withstand critical scrutiny," containing poorly reasoned arguments and little evidence; and second, readers are unlikely to make the effort to scrutinize fictions since they "do not approach works of fiction concerned about being misled by their contents, or equipped with the knowledge that would be necessary to evaluate them" (Prentice and Gerrig 1999: 533). In fact, scrutiny goes down to the extent that the narratives are personally engaging, prompt imagery, and possess narrative structure (Slater 2002; Green and Brock 2002). But of course these are the same features of *Lincoln* that facilitate comprehension and retention of information. In other words, the cognitive rewards and risks are two sides of the same coin.

Yet readers of fiction do not believe everything they read, no matter how engaging the narrative. A number of experiments (cited in the previous paragraph) indicate that readers are likely to compartmentalize text contents when they believe the material to be made up or when the text contains explicit statements that the author lacks accurate information. Readers for whom the topic of a fiction is personally relevant, or who are high in "need for cognition" (that is, they like to think), are also more likely to scrutinize fictional information. On the other hand, readers are more likely to incorporate information from fictions to the degree that it is applicable to the real world—for instance, general information about whales as opposed to specific information about Ahab.

What does all this tell us about how readers will incorporate or compartmentalize what they read in *Lincoln*? The subtitle is an explicit warning against believing everything,

but the fact that the novel treats individuals and events familiar to most readers increases the potential applicability of the information to the real world. On the other hand, most readers are familiar with historical novels that change specific facts while remaining faithful to the broad outline of events. So readers might resist the incorporation of particular facts (e.g., that Lincoln regularly used a laxative called ‘Blue Mass’) while nonetheless incorporating more general features of their situation models (e.g., that Washington, D.C., was a swamp during the early 1860’s). This result should assuage the concerns of those who think readers should be especially careful in accepting what they read in works labeled ‘fiction.’ But it is not really a good result in this case: Lincoln did, in fact, use a laxative called ‘Blue Mass.’ Vidal is just as careful about specific details as about general claims, except where he purposely fictionalizes.

Even granting Vidal’s overall accuracy, many will hesitate to agree that *Lincoln* is a good source of propositional knowledge. If readers approach this novel the same way they approach other novels—that is, without much scrutiny—they could be as likely to believe the false information in *Lincoln* as the true. And of course the various ways in which *Lincoln* enhances comprehension and encourages belief formation also apply to narratives that are much less accurate (a problem pointed out by Shaun Nichols). We would not say that *any* work utilizing the techniques we find in *Lincoln* is *ipso facto* a good source of factual information. If the improvements in text comprehension that I have outlined apply equally well to such fictions, how can they contribute to the acquisition of knowledge? Don’t they show instead that there remains an inescapable tension between the purposes of fiction-writing and the goal of telling the truth? I consider these questions in the final section.

§5. Knowledge and Value

One conclusion of §3 is that the techniques Vidal uses to make *Lincoln* a better story can facilitate the acquisition of historical knowledge. Yet the results of §4 put this conclusion into doubt, because the techniques that improve comprehension and retention of information also make it more likely that readers will believe what is false. What should we infer from this combination of results?

We do not want to say that the potential for false beliefs by itself removes *Lincoln* from consideration as a source of factual knowledge. Just because our teachers, textbooks, eyes, ears, etc., have sometimes given us false information, does not mean that beliefs acquired through these means fail to constitute knowledge. Perhaps, however, the increased chance of false beliefs is not the issue. It has been suggested to me (by Amie Thomasson) that the real objection to construing *Lincoln* as a good source of factual knowledge is that Vidal’s method is “sneaky”: rather than using *evidence* to persuade us, Vidal relies on narrative “gimmicks” designed to generate such a vivid picture of the president in our minds that we cannot help but believe it. We already know that these techniques lower readers’ scrutiny of textual information. But if we say that beliefs acquired without close inspection cannot constitute knowledge, we will have to conclude that we know very little. In particular, most of the beliefs we acquire through *testimony* would not count as knowledge, since we rarely check the evidence of our sources. Acquiring beliefs about Lincoln’s presidency from Vidal’s novel is acquiring beliefs on the basis of testimony, rather than by weighing evidence. So the question of whether this process yields knowledge depends on what it takes to learn through testimony.

I think that a reliabilist conception of knowledge is the most promising approach. On such an account, a belief counts as knowledge so long as it is true and was caused through a reliable process, that is, a process that ordinarily yields truths through non-coincidental mechanisms. Perception is normally a reliable process: if my belief that I see a chair in front

of me is caused by my seeing a chair in front of me (and not, e.g., by hallucinations or poor lighting conditions), the belief counts as knowledge. For a process to be reliable in this sense does not require that the believer know that it is; here I assume an externalist position on knowledge, according to which a knower need not be aware of the processes by which she knows. I will consider the internalist perspective below.

Testimony, like perception, is normally a reliable process of acquiring information. In any particular case, however, it might be unreliable, for instance if the person whose testimony you believe is (whether you know it or not) ignorant or deceptive. It would not be uncommon to lump fictions in with such unreliable forms of testimony. They do not give us the whole truth; their authors seem free to mix fact and invention at will, without making explicit the difference. If a reader happens to pick up some true beliefs in the course of reading such a narrative, isn't this just a coincidence?

Note what would follow from an affirmative answer. If reliability is a condition for knowledge, and reading fictions is defined as an unreliable process, then there is no possibility of learning from these narratives. The implication is that readers should compartmentalize *everything* contained in the mental representations they develop in reading fiction. But a sweeping "yes" answer would be a mistake. It would force us to deny that readers ever learn from fiction, whereas the fact that they learn from fiction ought to be a datum that our theories explain. And total compartmentalization would prevent readers from expanding their knowledge. This extreme isolation of fictional information is rarely, if ever, justified; even fairy tales provide some "life lessons."

There is obviously a vast difference between *Lincoln* and, say, "Hansel and Gretel." The difference is not that *Lincoln* happens to have real persons as characters; the cast that traipses through the pages of Doctorow's *Ragtime* are real, but their actions are pure invention. By contrast with *Ragtime*, "Hansel and Gretel," and most other fictions, *Lincoln* is designed to convey specific historical information. And it succeeds: readers of the novel can acquire numerous true beliefs about the facts of Lincoln's presidency. Whether these beliefs constitute knowledge depends, not on the reliability of learning from fiction *in general*, but on the reliability of learning from this work in particular.

Some authors of fictionalized texts have knowledge of their subject, while others do not; and authors are more likely to be reliable about some things rather than others. I have assumed that Vidal is accurate about everything he does not purposely fictionalize. This would make reading the novel a more reliable process of acquiring beliefs than reading most fictions and most nonfiction texts (think of all the documents on the internet, or most of the scientific treatises ever written). Even so, the bigger concern is that *readers* will not reliably discriminate fact from fiction. The empirical results I discussed in §4 tell us is that no reader is likely to be either entirely reliable or entirely unreliable at distinguishing the true from the false; and that some readers are more reliable than others. A reader who was just as likely to believe Vidal as to believe Jules Verne would seem to arrive at true beliefs in a way too coincidental to count as knowledge.

This suggests that readers familiar with genre conventions or the techniques of certain authors—even if they cannot articulate the specific conventions or techniques—are more likely to track true and false information accurately. Although testimony is normally reliable, a subtitle like *A Novel* certainly counts as a reason to increase scrutiny, especially with respect to particular facts. But as we have seen, a reader of *Lincoln* who compartmentalizes this type of information (e.g., Lincoln's use of Blue Mass) will thereby lose an opportunity to learn something. To realize this requires knowing something about Vidal's methods. The debate between Vidal and Current illustrates this point nicely. The novel provides information about the perspectives of Lincoln's contemporaries, and only indirectly about the historical facts. An awareness of narrative technique seems to be a prerequisite for learning

from *Lincoln*. But this is not a feature unique to fiction. For instance, you have to know something about the conventions of ancient Roman histories to know that it was common for historians to make up speeches and battle descriptions (Nelson 1973: 5).

It is worth mentioning that the type of collateral information that increases a reader's reliability also provides a way to explain knowledge from fiction from an internalist perspective, that is, on the assumption that knowledge requires awareness of the justification of our beliefs. As Aaron Meskin has pointed out, this looks like a difficult task: if you ask me how I know something about Lincoln, answering "I read it in a novel" doesn't seem like much justification. But although "I read it in a novel" is not, in general, a good reason to believe that certain people said and did such-and-such, "I read it in Gore Vidal's novel *Lincoln*" is, in fact, a good reason to believe that certain people said and did such-and-such. Of course, I know this only because I have done some additional research. If this concerns you, notice that "I read it in a work of nonfiction" is not, in general, a good justification for any beliefs. One ought to have reasons to believe that the author is reliable, no matter the classification of the work. And we have such reasons for *Lincoln*.

If this is right, then we should conclude that—at least for readers who know something about Vidal's methods—*Lincoln* is an excellent source of historical knowledge. That it is a source of knowledge at all depends upon the variety of factors that determine the reliability of both author and reader. Research into how we engage with works like *Lincoln* suggests the need for an account of knowledge sensitive to differing degrees of reliability. And it shows that we can conclude nothing general about the possibility of acquiring propositional knowledge from works of fiction. The fact that we can learn about history from *Lincoln* tells us little about what we can learn from other works.

That *Lincoln* is an *excellent* source of knowledge, on the other hand, depends on the cognitive advantages afforded by Vidal's use of various novelistic techniques. Consideration of *Lincoln* indicates that there is no *inherent* tension between the cognitive purpose of transmitting information and the aesthetic purpose of telling a good story. The tension is really between two different epistemic values: the value of sticking entirely to the facts, and the value of presenting the facts in a way that encourages better comprehension and long-term retention of information. The goal of telling a good story may be inconsistent with the first, but it contributes positively to the second. This is one way in which the aesthetic value of a work can enhance its cognitive value. I think the relationship goes both ways: given that one of the intentions of Vidal in writing *Lincoln* was to convey historical information, the novel's success at doing so should count toward its aesthetic value—but to defend this claim would require a different paper. For the present, I conclude by noting that in learning from fictions, we face the choice remarked by William James in "The Will to Believe": between seeking truth and avoiding error. The right choice depends on the particular work in question. In the case of *Lincoln*, I suggest that the tradeoff is worth it.

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