

Chapter 3

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 can instead be traced to the assumption that the task of aesthetics is to explain the *special* cognitive value of fiction. While the value of many works of non-fiction may be measured, in part, by their ability to transmit information, most works of fiction lack such a didactic aim. Thus, many of us conclude that the transmission of information is irrelevant to the value of such works.

Contributing to the force of this conclusion are two other commonly held 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 in attempting 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* (1984) 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. I then provide a sketch of how we learn from texts, and use this model to examine the potential rewards and risks of acquiring beliefs from *Lincoln*. In the final section I turn to the broader theoretical questions posed by these results.