Fiction for the Purposes of History
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The argument most frequently made on behalf of historical fiction is that, if responsibly done, it can stimulate interest in the study of history. But I’d like to offer a stronger argument, based on my experience working in both forms: if properly understood, the writing of historical fiction can be a valuable adjunct to the work of historians in their discipline. A novel can be as accurate as a history in telling what happened, when, and how. It can, and should, be based on careful research and rigorous analysis of evidence. But the distinction and advantage of the fictional form lies in the way it uses evidence and represents conclusions. The novel tests historical hypotheses by a kind of thought-experiment: assume that events are driven by the conditions and forces you believe to be most significant—what sort of history, what kind of human experience, then results? For the thought-experiment to work, the fiction writer must treat a theory which may be true as if it was certainly true, without quibble or qualification; and credibly represent a material world in which that theory appears to work. We should not suppose that thought-experiments, however elegant, make empirical tests unnecessary. But as the history of modern physics shows, without such experiments, the forward movement of knowledge becomes slower and more difficult. Moreover, because the novel imaginatively recovers the indeterminacy of a past time, the form allows writer and reader to explore those alternative possibilities for belief, action, and political change, unrealized by history, which existed in the past. In so doing, the novelist may restore, as imaginable possibilities, the ideas, movements, and values defeated or discarded in the struggles that produced the modern state.

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‘Novels arise from the shortcomings of history.’ I take this remark by the nineteenth-century German romantic writer Novalis in a triple sense: as a criticism of the limits of history writing as a discipline; and as an
observation about the inadequacies of historical experience itself. It is also a precise description of why I started writing historical fiction.

History is what it is, but it is also what we make of it. What we call ‘history’ is not a thing, an object of study, but a story we choose to tell about things. Events undoubtedly occur: the Declaration of Independence was signed on 4 July, 1776, yesterday it rained, Napoleon was short, I had a nice lunch. But to be construed as ‘history’ such facts must be selected and arranged on some sort of plan, made to resolve some sort of question which can only be asked subjectively and from a position of hindsight. Thus all history writing requires a fictive or imaginary representation of the past. There is no reason why, in principle, a novel may not have a research basis as good or better than that of a scholarly history; and no reason why, in principle, a novelist’s portrayal of a past may not be truer and more accurate than that produced by a scholarly historian.

Historians like to associate their field with the social sciences, but in fact the discipline is more like novel writing. Ask an economist or sociologist for an explanation and you get statistics, axioms and equations which account for behaviour with mathematical elegance. Ask a historian and what you get is a story, an account of experience that is most valid when least elegant: because it must account for those many elements which are at play in every human event, but are not mathematically necessary to produce the outcome—indeterminacies, overdeterminacies, excesses, misjudgements, divagations, misunderstandings, outrageous coincidences, craziness, wasted motion, emotional outbursts, unfathomable errors of judgement, random acts of kindness, irrational malice.

The argument made most frequently on behalf of historical fiction is that, if responsibly done, it can be an effective instrument of popular education; or at least a means for stimulating interest in the study of history. Most practicing historians I know were first attracted to their subjects by reading historical fiction. I’d like to offer a stronger argument. If properly understood, the writing of historical fiction can be a valuable adjunct to the work of historians in their discipline. To explain what I mean I have to begin by telling a story.

As a scholar I have been concerned with the ways in which communities and nations transform their historical experience into the symbolic terms of myth; then use mythological renderings of the past to organize their responses to real-world crises and political projects. My first book, Regeneration Through Violence (1973), dealt with the origins of American myths of race, violence and progress in the history of the colonial frontier. I wanted to carry this study forward to the present, to show how these myths had developed through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into the era...
of movies and Vietnam. The next volume, *The Fatal Environment*, centred on the myth of Custer’s Last Stand as a symbolic bridge between the old frontier and the new industrial order. I wanted to contrast the spurious romance of Custer’s cavalry charges with the modern reality of the Civil War, and so to include a brief account—no more than a paragraph—describing a Civil War battle in which the style of combat was unmistakably modern.

I had been fascinated with the Civil War since I was 9. In 1951 our family had driven down to Florida, stopping at Civil War battlefields and having some upsetting encounters with segregation. After that, reading about the war became a serious avocation, though not my professional specialization. But I had mastered the lore of the great battles, and remembered that the Battle of the Petersburg Crater was considered a precursor of trench warfare on the Western Front.

When I began researching the battle I was surprised to discover a great deal more in the story than I had remembered. I brought to the study a historical consciousness that had been formed by the political and social upheavals of the 1960s, and the new revisionist forms of history writing developed between 1965 and 1975. In particular, the ‘New Social History’ had made visible to historians the lives, beliefs, words and thoughts of those ‘invisible classes’ who make history ‘from the bottom up’. Race was central to the battle. Black troops were trained to lead the assault, and their morale had soared with the hope that victory would prove them worthy of equality. Incompetent generals doomed them to failure, and the battle ended in a race riot and massacre, during which some white Union troops joined rebels in killing black soldiers. But class was also part of the story: the battle occurred because a regiment of Pennsylvania coal-miners undermined and blew up a Confederate fort; and I discovered that after the war, the commanding officer of the regiment became head of the Coal and Iron Police, which broke up the ‘Mollie Maguires’ and the coal-miners’ union.

Anyone who has worked with historical records knows that the documentation of any large, complex human event is never fully adequate or reliable, and when one attempts to account for the motives and beliefs that govern human action, information becomes even more slippery. It follows that historians often understand more about the stories they tell than can be proved according to the rules of the discipline. There comes a moment, therefore, when the historian must choose between knowledge and understanding: between telling the whole story as he or she has come to understand it; or only what can be proved, with evidence and argument. The difference between historiography and novelizing about history is a difference of genre—but that difference is not trivial. Cultural practice leads
us to expect different things from works called history and novels. What we take as bad faith in a historian may be acceptable and even essential in producing credible and illuminating fiction (and vice versa). If you prefer the realization of the story to the perfection of the argument—if you feel compelled to express your full understanding of events, despite gaps in your knowledge—then what you are writing is historical fiction, not ‘history’, and should be unambiguously identified as such.

It was clear that there was simply not enough firsthand testimony by black or coal-miner participants to allow me to tell their story as a historian. I had always wanted to try my hand at fiction. The Crater story was rich in possibilities. It had a strong narrative line following the countdown to the final battle; and it invited a treatment which could develop multiple points of view, reflecting the social and cultural perspectives of freed slaves, poor whites, coal-miners, immigrants, and the emergent ruling classes of the post-war North and South. It also appealed to an ambition I was not previously aware of. By writing such a novel I would be assuming the role of those authors whose works I had studied as shapers of American nationality and culture, retelling the story of the American past to bring out what I took to be its hidden values and significance for the present life of the Republic. I would also be challenging one of the most fundamental national myths, that old Gone With the Wind version of the Civil War which devalued what was most important to me: the idea of freedom, of racial equality, of a nation dedicated to the proposition that all are created equal. That myth is still potent enough today. In 1977, when I started The Crater, I could find no other Civil War novels written in the previous twenty-five years that had taken the Union side. So I thought I would try novelizing for a month, then go back and finish my scholarly book.

Once I started sketching out the shape of the novel and testing myself by writing a scene or two, it became psychologically impossible to pull myself away. I tried to go back to writing Fatal Environment and simply could not do it—not until a draft of The Crater was done. Yet once the novel was written I was immediately able to return to and complete the drafting of the scholarly book.

It is a pattern I have followed ever since: in the course of research I will find a story that seems to embody everything that I am most concerned with, but which cannot be fully developed in a scholarly mode. I will use that as the basis for fiction. The Crater followed my first book, Regeneration Through Violence. After Fatal Environment (1985), and while researching Gunfighter Nation (1992), I published The Return of Henry Starr (1998), a historical Western based on research on the silent-movie era and turn-of-
the-century racial violence. My most recent novel, *Abe* (2000), is a character study of the young Lincoln, which developed out of research into the history and theory of American nationality.

The two kinds of writing are mutually supportive in all sorts of ways, but perhaps the simplest is this: because I know I can turn any good story into a novel, I don’t have to twist my analytical argument to make a place for such a story; and because I have developed the ideas connected with the story in scholarly detail, I don’t feel compelled to load the novel down with excess intellection and argument.

But writing *The Crater* also engaged me in a very different way of imagining my subject. The idea of novelizing an event is to see it from within, from the limited and contingent perspective of those who are caught up in the action. To do all this requires first of all a personal engagement, a projection of yourself into past lives—a finding of what in yourself might correspond to that historically alien consciousness, and a stretching of your own imaginative limits to encompass experiences that are beyond you. There is no better mental exercise for training historians to appreciate the difference of the past, the contingent nature of historical experience, and the rooted subjectivity of all historical actors.

The engagement is both analytical and personal, which is why I think I found it so compulsively absorbing. But a historical novel cannot (or should not) be primarily personal: it has to involve imaginative outreach to the strangeness and difference of the past; and it requires a language suited to representing that strangeness. To begin with, you have to learn in detail who the citizens of the past were, where they came from, what kinds of things they would know, how they would think and talk about them. And you have to pretend to forget what you know—how events will turn out, what later generations will say it all meant. And yet, not entirely forget—because one source of power in the form is the fact that the readers do know how it all turns out. And so, if you play on that knowledge delicately enough, you can induce readers to complete the historical narrative for themselves, in their own minds—and thus recognize for themselves the ironies, the mismatches of intention and fulfilment, that shape the history of human events.

A novel can be as accurate as a history in telling what happened, when and how. It can, and should, be based on the same kind of research and rigorous analysis of evidence. But the distinction and advantage of the fictional form lies in the way it uses evidence and represents conclusions. The truth the novel seeks is poetic rather than historiographical: it sacrifices fidelity to non-essential facts in order to create in the reader a vivid sense of what it may have been like to live among such facts—and also a sense of what those facts mean in some larger sense—and to achieve that in a flash.
of recognition, rather than as the conclusion to a necessarily laborious argument. Implicit in this process is an alternative approach to the theoretical work of the discipline.

All historical interpretation begins with hypotheses about the way things, people and institutions work. The historian develops hypotheses analytically; the novelist synthetically. The late Herbert Gutman offered a classic illustration of the analytical mode in the introduction to *Work, Culture and Society*. He identifies as historical subject an Irish woman textile worker who led an 1875 strike in Fall River, Massachusetts. Then he shows how analytical historiography divides the woman’s experience into nine discrete specializations of what was then called ‘the New Social History’:

1. The person moved to Fall River: Mobility History.
2. The person was Irish: Immigration History.
3. The person was female: Women’s History . . .
   . . . and so on down to:
4. The person engaged in a disorder: Collective Behaviour History.²

The specifics of such a list would be different for a figure such as Abraham Lincoln, and today’s roster of specializations might differ:

1. Moved to Indiana frontier: New Western History.
2. Problems with father: Psychohistory.
3. Built log cabin: Material culture.
4. Lost his virginity: History of sexuality . . .
   . . . and so on. We can perhaps imagine a historiography that would combine or coordinate these specialized points of view to produce a more rounded portrayal of human experience. But the canons of the profession would still require that all the architecture of analysis be fully displayed, and theoretical issues explicitly addressed and resolved.³

A historical novel has to subsume the process of creating knowledge into its representation, displaying the character’s life as a subjectively experienced whole—at the same time implicitly highlighting those forces or influences (derived from historical analysis) which seem most significant. It can do more than re-create historical events, ideas, manners, environments. It can create a simulacrum or model of the historical world, miniaturized and compressed in scale and time; a model which embodies a theory of historical causation. The hypothesis can be tested by a kind of thought-experiment: assume that events are driven by the conditions and forces you believe to be most significant—what sort of history, what kind of human experience, then results? For the thought-experiment to work, the fiction writer must treat a theory which *may* be true as if it was *certainly*
true, without quibble or qualification; and credibly represent a material world in which that theory appears to work. Is it your theory that historical action is driven by abstract impersonal forces? or individual calculations of rational self-interest? or Oedipal rage? or the play of significations? Then portray for me a human life, in which I can believe, that is lived in these terms.

Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* is as accurate as available sources permitted about the details of the Fort William Henry massacre: the events are in proper order, the commanders are properly named, the geography and costumes are correct. But Cooper’s ‘explanation’ of the massacre rests on a made-up story about the abduction of the daughters of Colonel Munro (the Colonel’s name is historical, the daughters’ not); and this fiction transforms a mere chronicle into an explanation of American history: that it is shaped by a struggle of races in which sexual mastery is linked with political triumph. The value of Cooper’s novel as an interpretation of history does not rest on the accuracy of detail, but on the quality of his explanatory fiction.

There are of course better explanatory theories to account for the development of American nationality, and better—that is, ‘truer’—ways of modelling those theories. The political and cultural developments what followed the Second World War broadened the popular understanding of American nationality to include hitherto marginalized minorities. New scholarly theories and innovative approaches to research challenged the standard narrative of national history, and gave access to a history that was more complex than we had assumed. We should not suppose that thought-experiments, however elegant, make empirical tests unnecessary, but as the history of modern physics shows, without such experiments, the forward movement of knowledge becomes slower and more difficult. Why not propose, as a thought-experiment, something that might amount to one chapter of a new national narrative, which incorporates these new understandings?

I know a lot of academic historians who find that proposition suspect. It is the historian’s responsibility to distinguish fact from fiction, and to present findings in plain style, without the mystifying devices of literature. My own scholarly work is almost entirely absorbed in the project of historicizing and demystifying the myths of American nationality, and in showing how those myths have distorted the work of historians, as well as that of popular artists and politicians. It is easy enough to show that nineteenth-century historians mythologized their subject by adopting the symbolism and narrative tropes of literary romanticism, to create master narratives or myths for the emerging nation-states of the West. There is also
a political objection to the type of fiction I have been describing. American myths and the master narratives of American historians have tended to reify and reinforce the primacy of nationality as a way of organizing human society. Consequently, such narratives also privilege the ideologies and programmes of those classes whose interests are most fully realized in the politics of the nation-state. Since the 1960s there has even been a bias in the profession against the use of narrative, because by its formal nature it tends to conceal and ‘naturalize’ its assumptions of value. Social historians and postmodernists, who agree on nothing else, agree on this.

But must all narratives, all historical myths, necessarily be master narratives, or myths that affirm the ideology of a dominant class?

In my first book I adopted the view that our heritage of racial and national myths fatally limited our national response to the moral and political demands of the modern world; and that they continued to do so, despite the scholarly and critical analysis devoted to exploding them. I drew on the theory of archetypes and on structural anthropology, which treat myth as an ahistorical phenomenon, revealing fundamental and unchanging structures of culture (structuralism), psychology (Jung) or language (semiology). The logic of these theories seemed to point towards the conclusion later reached by the ‘strong linguistic’ school of postmodernism, which asserts that language is effectively a prison-house or black hole from which neither consciousness nor behaviour can escape.

But by writing a novel, I had myself committed (or attempted) an act of myth-making against the grain of American myth. As I reconsidered my scholarly project in light of that crime, it occurred to me that what I had done others must have done before me. Although myth is certainly a conservative force, insisting as it does that the past be recalled, clearly American culture had changed over time in significant ways, and American myths had been adapted to reflect those changes, tales of Anglo-Saxon Indian fighters giving way to movies about ethnic platoons defending jungle outposts against the Japanese. My scholarly work informed me that myth-making was a continuous process, indeed a fundamental cultural process which enabled societies to maintain their cultural cohesion through time and change. Americans in the past had made their myths out of real memories and fantasies, novels and histories, good honest historiography and the kind of history that is written with an ink of liquified prejudice. But the myths were made: constructed by human authors and audiences. If, as my scholarship suggested, Fenimore Cooper and his disciples had been able to formulate the terms of a national myth, which Americans recognized and adopted as their own story, why should it not be possible for some later writer to attempt the same achievement?
If culture were in fact a prison-house, if its forms and genres were straitjackets to the imagination, there would be no history, no change through time. The course of human events seems to me to argue otherwise. Cultural change, the transformation of linguistic and ideological structures, happens. People are evidently not mere victims of inherited myths and ideologies, but have an active role in transforming received culture. It follows that the forms and genres of culture, including narrative, are not a set of conceptual restraints but potentially a set of tools or instruments for dealing with a changing and troublesome reality.

I found a helpful theoretical formulation of this idea in Marshall Sahlins’ *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981). Sahlins sees culture as a dynamic, evolving complex of ideas, values and world-views—the dynamism driven by a continuous interaction of real-world event and social or individual memory (or myth).

People act upon circumstances according to their own cultural presuppositions, the socially given categories of persons and things. . . . [But] the worldly circumstances of human action are under no inevitable obligation to conform to [these] categories. . . . In the event they do not, the received categories are potentially revalued in practice, functionally redefined. According to the place of the received category in the cultural system as constituted, and the interests that have been affected, the system itself is more or less altered. At the extreme, what began as reproduction ends as transformation.4

If this theory is right, myths do not have limitless powers of falsification. Invention is always constrained by experience and memory, reference to a world believed to be factual—a memory whose truth can be verified by secular means. The world changes, balances of wealth and power shift, old orders lose authority, class order is disrupted, silent classes begin to speak, newcomers abruptly arrive on the scene. As myths evolve through historical usage, those who use them adapt their terms to new circumstances. At the core of culture is a continuous dialogue between myth and history, ‘plain invention’ and the ‘core of historical fact’.

As a historian and novelist I contribute to both parts of the dialogue. Clearly there are risks involved. The novels make my credentials as a historian suspect in some quarters. There is also a risk inherent in the novel form itself, which deals in implications and suggestions rather than in arguments and evidence. As a scholar I can limit the reader’s freedom to misunderstand me; as a novelist I exercise less overt control. My novels deal with the problem of race. Like Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*, by imagining racism from the inside I run the risk of
being mistaken for a racist—or worse, of reinforcing some benighted reader’s racist ideas.

Yet it seems to me worthwhile to run that risk. My scholarship teaches me that our collective consciousness is informed and shaped by mythic symbols and narratives. Analytical deconstructions of myth may undermine existing structures, but nothing can take the place of a myth but another myth, another story with the same historical resonance and moral authority. Analysis and criticism cannot displace, let alone replace, narrative. The need to compose experience into narrative is a fundamental attribute of human consciousness. Our sense of ourselves as distinct persons, our ability to think and act as subjective beings, our power as moral and social actors, absolutely depend upon our memory—our sense that our consciousness and being are continuous in time, that our present is the consequent of our personal past. Without that awareness of continuous life, how could we have any agency whatever? How could we exercise any sort of deliberate choice about what to do next? And what we call memory is a mental process by which we compose the raw registry of sensory experience into narratives, sequences of before-during-and-after. Nor can communities cohere through time, develop codes of solidarity and mutual respect, define and establish justice, or choose and pursue political and social objectives without the credible belief that their social bond is continuous in time.5

Nathan Huggins, the distinguished African-American historian, has pointed out that a formerly subject or excluded people requires such a narrative no less than the so-called ‘masters’, to affirm its sense of continuous identity and make use of its actual experience:

> Our times seem to call for new myths and a revised master narrative that better inspire and reflect our true condition. Such a new narrative … would bring slavery and the persistent oppression of race from the margin to the center, to define the limits and boundaries of the American dream.6

The revelations and shocks of the 1960s had produced a new, critical historiography, to carry on a massive project of mythological revision—a project that is still ongoing. Why should we not also have a type of historical fiction that is responsive to the new, critical historiography, and uses its insights? The old master narrative, the old historico-fictional myth, reifies certain forms of moral and political desire, certain visions of what the future of the nation ought to be. Why should the language of those who would criticize that myth, and define new forms of political and moral desire, be limited to theory and statistics? Why should not the Others, the
left, the queer, the marginal, express themselves in the strongest, most poetic, most appealing forms available? Why not use the language of national mythology to transform its meanings, or bring out latent possibilities repressed in the original?

Historical novels are always political in their implications—that is a given of the form. But the politics is of two kinds. There is of course the politics of content, the political perspective and values that shape the writer’s choice of subject and mode of treatment. Fenimore Cooper used his fiction to project a historical myth of racial nationalism; I use mine to project a myth in which racism is undone, and ideas of justice are questioned and redefined. But there is also a politics implied in the choice of the novel form. Novels don’t read well without strong characters, and the emphasis on character implies a theory of historical causation that contemporary historians find suspect: a ‘heroic’ theory, which emphasizes the agency of more or less powerful persons as shapers of events. I don’t think that this is necessarily a fatal difficulty for representing the way history actually gets made. In my own novels I am careful to show the powerful constraints and the multiple agencies that prevent heroes from realizing their desires. None the less, I accept and embrace the idea that is at the heart of novelized history, which is that human agency, consciousness and action really make a difference in historical outcomes. This is, in part, an article of political faith: I believe in political action to produce change and realize ideals of social justice, and I have seen it work. I want my fiction, like my scholarship, to assist in forming the critical consciousness that makes such action possible: the awareness that the things which shape our lives are made, not just given; that history is not a prison-house, or a railroad riding us on iron tracks to a determined end.

Precisely because the novel imaginatively recovers the indeterminacy of a past time, it is not bound simply to celebrate the mere outcome; but leaves the writer and reader free to explore those alternative possibilities for belief, action and political change, unrealized by history, which existed in the past. In so doing, the novelist may restore, as imaginable possibilities, the ideas, movements and values defeated or discarded in the struggles that produced the modern state—may produce a counter-myth, to play into and against the prevailing myths of the nation.

In my last novel I chose to write about Abraham Lincoln, because he remains a powerful presence in our political history and our national mythology; and because the issues with which he engaged as a living man, and the issues he has come to symbolize, are still the central and unresolved problems of American culture and politics: How do we reconcile the power of the state with the desire for freedom? How do we
overcome the contradiction between our democratic faith and our persistent racism? The heart of the Lincoln myth is a vital but unanswerable question: If he had not been assassinated, could he—would he—have made a difference in the history of American race relations and in American ideas of economic and social justice? Generations of Americans have asked the question, and imagined various possible answers, each a reflection on the national myth and the American democratic ideology, each an expression of political desire.

The answer to the question rests, in large part, on one’s reading of his character and motives. Lincoln was a master politician, confronting the most divisive controversy in American history. He played his ideological cards close to his vest, never offered a complete plan for post-war reconstruction, because he knew he would have to play many parts to achieve his ends, as he had during the war. What did he really think, or mean, by his words and actions? It is hard to really prove, using documents, what anyone really thinks, let alone a man such as Lincoln. Only in fiction does the historical writer have the freedom to fully imagine and represent for the reader the inner life of his or her subject.

I chose to write a novel about his childhood because that is the time of life when the basic elements of character are formed; and because the main incidents had no obvious political import, I was able to keep the primary focus on character rather than on ideology. The relative lack of detailed information about his early life gave me broader scope and licence for invention, without major departures from the record of known fact.

Historians and biographers tell us what the completed man was like, what his mature ideas were, and give us an idea of the contradictory elements of his character: his deep melancholy and coarse humour, his moral idealism and Machiavellian politics, his compassionate heart and his iron fist. To understand his character, I needed to be able to imagine how he got to be that man. My understanding of his character is of course based on research, which necessarily focuses on the writing he produced as an adult after 1832, and the observations of those who knew the grown man. I also researched the records and lore of his childhood with an eye for those incidents, which seemed to predict some element of his personality, or his mature beliefs. Most incidents in the novel take off from real (or at least attested) events, although I made minor alterations in sequence and chronology, and converted some indirect or ‘reading’ relationships with historical figures into face-to-face encounters. The guiding principle behind such inventions was always to dramatize the play of persons, ideas and forces that shaped Lincoln’s character as I understand it. Although I would not want the novel to be read as factual
history, I would be willing to defend my interpretation of Lincoln’s character on scholarly grounds.

Some of that understanding is based on general knowledge, especially of child development and family dynamics—what children are like, emotionally and intellectually, at different stages. But this general knowledge had to be rooted in particulars: what were parent/child relations like in that time and place? What schooling and churching was available? What was daily life like? I found a range of sources, from collections of anecdotes and records relating to the towns Lincoln lived in as a child, to scholarly books that explained how log cabins were built, what kinds of crops they grew and how they grew them, what things cost, what books and papers there were to read. Some of my sources had chapters on local slang—language, that is the most important thing to know: how people talk, what words are in their heads and how they put them together: not just what they thought, but how they thought it—what slang they used; what jokes or puns would occur to them; what songs they would have heard; what objects, personalities or events were available in their world of reference; what attitude towards experience expresses itself in their peculiar styles of speech—everything that gives an experience its tone and manner.

The records tell us that Abe learned compassion. I had to show how he learned it, taking real characters and incidents and giving them a new meaning. I had to set aside Lincoln’s adult way of thinking and talking, and re-express these big ideas in terms of very small events, little exchanges of courtesy, or rudeness, between Abe and other characters; moments of perception which young Abe could only half understand. Although the significance of what he learns is known to the reader, for the portrayal of character to be both historically and psychologically valid Abe can only think of himself as ‘Tom Lincoln’s Boy’, his hopes and horizons limited by the world in which he is immersed. It is part of the novel’s historiographical task, as well as its novelistic task, to show how other larger possibilities enter that world, and open windows on to a wider reality.

The test of any American leader, and of anyone who writes about America, is how he or she deals with the colour line. Historians who have researched Lincoln’s youth have established that his parents were against slavery as a matter if religious principle, and left Kentucky for Indiana to get away from slavery. However knowing that does not tell us much about how Lincoln responded to black people—we know that many whites in his region hated blacks as much as they hated slavery, and that blacks were not allowed to settle in his part of Indiana.

What was there in Lincoln’s youth that would have enabled him to see the likeness between himself—a free white man—and black slaves? In
Lincoln’s youth a father was entitled by law to hire his sons out and to take all their wages for himself. We know that Tom Lincoln availed himself of the privilege, and that Abe deeply resented it, considered it a deliberate interference with his wish to acquire an education, and a humiliation. Precisely the same privilege was enjoyed and exercised by slave-owners, some of whom hired their slaves to farmers on the ‘free’ Indiana side of the river. There was thus a shameful likeness between the boy’s situation and that of the slave. Most white American boys, faced with that shameful likeness, assuaged their wounded feelings by becoming even more contemptuous of slaves: I may be bound, but I at least I ain’t a nigger. Lincoln always speaks of the slave as someone just like himself, who resents being forced to work for someone else; and he always speaks of himself, and his fellow whites, as people who could easily become slaves if circumstances were slightly changed.

In researching the collections of reminiscences, rumours and tales by people who had known Lincoln, I came across one incident that seemed to shed light on this question. It was the kind of anecdote that historians would never take seriously, a bit of oral history passed down a couple of generations, hearsay, and not obviously political. The story is told that Lincoln learned clog-dancing from blacks who had come across the river for Kentucky with their master to trade at a tavern where Abe was working. Not only did Lincoln learn the dance—from a people with whom he was not supposed to associate—but he used the dance as a weapon against a neighbour in Pigeon Creek to whom he had taken a dislike. He broke up the man’s party by putting on a display of clog-dancing, which one observer said—and these are his words—was ‘as good as ary nigger’. I know of no historian who has told that story. It doesn’t prove anything about Lincoln’s views on race, or slavery, or the Missouri Compromise, or any of the things historians care about. But it does suggest a great deal about the range of his response to black people and the colour line. He recognized that Black people represented something in opposition to his own culture, which he found so oppressive; so that by dancing black he was acting out a form of rebellion, and linking himself symbolically to black slaves.

There were possibilities in this exchange for a crossing of the colour line bolder than anything he could imagine, let alone attempt, once the child became a man. I think the possibility was a real one, that subsequent history foreclosed it. The record of his mature years reflects both his principled commitment to the ideal of equality, and his subjection to the prejudices of his time, his compromises on questions of racial democracy. Yet with all that, we also have the statement by Frederick Douglass that of all the white men whom he met, only Lincoln never made him feel conscious of his race.
Ralph Ellison, the great African-American novelist, caught this quality of Lincoln in his novel *Juneteenth*. He wrote, ‘So yes, he’s one of us, not only because he freed us to the extent that he could, but because he freed himself of that awful inherited pride they deny to us, and in doing so he became a man.’ The story of how he might have done that—that was the story I was trying to tell.

Telling the story in this way does two things that I think are valuable. It allows us to imagine Lincoln’s response to slavery, not as an exercise in abstract logic, but as something arising from the kinds of experiences that are at once ordinary and fundamental to the shaping of a personality. I think some such experience—perhaps not the one I chose, but one not unlike it—must lie at the root of every strongly-held moral and political belief.

Imagining Lincoln’s experience in this way also allows us to re-imagine our own experience of the colour line, to adopt a new orientation towards our memories of racial interaction, and towards the ways that the history of the colour line has been taught to us. To imagine a Lincoln who could dance black is to imagine the possibility of a ‘more perfect Lincoln’ than history gave us, and, since he is the saviour of the Union, a more perfect nation as well. I think that scene does tell us something ‘true’ about Lincoln’s response to race. But even if it does not, to entertain the possibility that it might do so is to open your mind to the possibility of making a different ‘history’ for the nation that has been left in our keeping.

Notes

[1] See e.g White 1973, p. 57.
[2] Gutman 1976, pp. xii-xiii.
[3] LaCapra 1987, pp. 118 – 119.
[4] Sahlins 1981, p. 67. See also pp. 4, 6 and 72.
[5] For narrative as a fundamental structure of personality and cognition see Schanck 1982, pp. 19, 40 – 41, 51ff. For mythic narrative as fundamental constituent of social and especially national identity see Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, pp. 49, 81, 83, and especially pp. 94, 96; Anderson 1983, chs 1 – 3, 8 – 9. See also Anthony D. Smith 1987, pp. 177 – 180, 183 – 186; 1999, chs 2, 4, 5, 10; and 1981, pp. 65 – 71, 177 – 178, 206 – 208; Hosking and Schopflin (eds.) 1997, especially. chs 1, 6.
[6] Huggins 1995, p. 283.

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