Special Forum on Pedagogy:

FILLING SILENCES, OR, WHY USE FICTION TO TEACH HISTORY?

By

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> "What haunted Kierkegaard in the story of Abraham and Isaac was the paradox of faith—in particular the secret triumph of faith by the very power of its absurdity against the public ethical demands before which faith is *merely* absurd. … Morality is the sphere of abstract principles of behavior; to religion alone belongs the unique historical moment, the moment that cannot be told because it tells so much." —Marjorie Grene[1]

The man under the red Boston baseball cap looked like a narc. I should have known that something was amiss at that point. But this was a college creative writing seminar in the early 1990s, my first since toying with the idea of becoming a Fine Arts major, and I was more worried about my presentation in front of the whole class than I was about the attendees. Plus, there are no narcs in college writing classes.

The class began with the usual announcements of poetry readings, film festivals, art exhibitions and the like. This process took just long enough for me to get good and self-conscious; it was with sweaty hands and a reddened face that I finally made my way to the front of the classroom to give my presentation.

Maybe seventeen people were in the room, positioned, as was the custom, in a discussion-promoting semi-circle. Not only was I the youngest student in the class, I was the only not-yet-English major. This was, in fact, my first "writing" seminar—"Writers as Readers," it was called. Our poet-professor stood fast upon the principle that before one is qualified to pick up the pen or

[1] Marjorie Grene, *Dreadful Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 141.

knock away at the keyboard in order to compose something worthwhile, one must read the good, the bad, and the ugly and learn the methods by which the wheat and the chaff might be sifted. At the time, a novel a week seemed like a grueling pace. The whole class, I thought to myself, was painful. And I approached each book gingerly as one might when attempting to extract a splinter of wood from under a toenail: I expected that it was going to hurt and that I might as well get through it while doing as little damage to myself as possible. I learned early in the process that I had not the skills to decipher quality in writing—in part because I was not a fast or close enough reader, in part because I liked all of the wrong books and disliked the right ones.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* was one of the books I liked. That is until I found out it was a fraud. I was uncertain my classmates knew its status as a doppelganger—a purely fictional account masquerading as historical narrative—and I felt that, now that the podium was in front of me, they should know.

I wanted to expose the whole project as a phony *because* I liked it so much; I felt cheated that my heart and mind tracked along in the wet dark beside Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk and Rat Kiley. We trudged together through the Vietnamese jungle. I was at My Khe when the narrator (I assumed it was O'Brien himself) "fragged" a young Viet Cong dressed in black with rubber sandals because he assumed he was facing an enemy combatant.[2] I felt the weight of the guns, the packs, the memories of home, the alienness, the foot rot. I smelt muddy hair and dank leather and the tinny-powdery smell of gunfire and lots of blood. I dripped from the jungle steam and the moments of cold-sweat panic. I was mad that O'Brien made my eyes well up with tears multiple times throughout the book. I was mad that main characters died for pointless, unheroic, seemingly random reasons. And for what, I thought. For a *lie*. (They were just characters, but I still thought somehow that they were really-*real*.)

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[2] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

After I mustered up the courage, I told my class what I had discovered by reading reviews of the book: that O'Brien had never been in Vietnam—not as a soldier at least. That these people were just characters. That History was True. And this was Not True, no matter how historical-seeming. This was like *Platoon* or *Born on the Fourth of July*: good stories but not history. Not *facts*. O'Brien transgressed when he portrayed this as truth—as personal narrative.

Tim O'Brien looked up at me thoughtfully and wordlessly from underneath the red Boston cap the whole time I gave my pedantic little tirade. I couldn't really see his face, so I'm not sure if he smiled or frowned, if he thought this was supremely funny to hear a 19-year-old tell him he was writing lies, if he was hoping I would eventually wise up and get the point. When our professor finally introduced Tim O'Brien to the class, I got the point.

This essay is a descendant of the lesson I learned that day—the lesson that fiction can work to augment the teaching of history. It's not a straightforward lesson. Even by using the word "fiction," I am gesturing at several overlapping themes: the composition of literature, the interplay of particulars and generalities, the value of imagination and creativity, and the creation of thick descriptive context, characters, and language. I am also hinting at an implicit division of *real* and *fictional.* And it is the above panoply of concepts—especially this perceived division between the true or extant with the imaginative or fictitious—that throws up three apparent impediments to using fiction as a pedagogical tool within the field of history. I'll explore these tensions and potential solutions to them below.

The first hurdle to leap when using fiction, the book marketing category, to teach history, the subject matter, is that students believe there is a bright, ineffable line separating the two. Some individuals, unfamiliar with the professional practice of history (I lump my undergraduate self in this camp), exhibit a knee-jerk aversion to the claim that history and fiction are treading similar (*note*: not isomorphic, perhaps not even parallel) paths. I have experienced this while teaching introductory

undergraduate surveys. I have seen this in graduate seminars. And it begs the question: why such strong reactions?

Much of the tension is tied up with a common sense conflation of what are actually two different questions: one epistemic, one ontological. *Is there history*, like its parent question, *Is there truth* has become, at least since Kant, quite tricky. Most of us are likely to make the intuitive claim, *Yes, there is truth/history.* Fewer of us are willing to go all the way to the hastily invoked sequitur: *And we can know all of it, dammit.* When pressed, I would guess that most historians would reply, *There* is *a history to know; our actual knowledge of it is incomplete and cloudy at best.* Can we know truth? Can we get to what is really true in the past? If not, is our responsibility to get as close as possible? To describe what we can know as well as we can? Plead total ignorance? Produce meaninglessness or noise to highlight the incomprehensibility of life in the world?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But I suspect that once we have taken a step back from heated claims that historians do or should get to the "really-real," we might be able to say that what counts in the pursuit of the past is not simply brute, uninterpreted fact—numbers of troops, Gross National Products, and the names of kings and their inbred descendents. These things are helpful, but we want to know more than this, we want to know *hows* and *whys*; by stepping away from claims that values and emotions cloud facts and truth, we might be able to get to a more "human" history.

Is "human" history what students want to read? Is it what historians want to teach? The commercial success of David McCullogh's biography of John Adams and his recent work *1776* indicate that—as long as there is at least a hand-waving toward the historical truth of the matter—Americans want something more than mere truth in their history books. Though students might complain when they directly confront the issue in a class, historical truth is of only relative importance. In a crude way, the virtual cult spawned by Dan Brown's *DaVinci Code* appears to

substantiate this claim. Historical factuality, while preferable to complete fabrication, is not necessarily a crucial reason to read history books.

For some historians, by contrast, facts are of utmost importance. Consider the closing salvo of Gordon Wood's recent review of Gary Nash's *The Unknown American Revolution.* "Maybe Nash sensed that his interpretation of his 'unknown Revolution' was already so overloaded with modern multicultural politics that addition[al] outlandish claim[s] would finally sink it," he scorns.[3] In other words, Wood asserts that there is a correct, factual interpretation of the causes of the War and Nash has missed it.

Why, aside from professional *raisons d'état*, is Nash's (mis-)interpretation so egregious to Wood? I would argue that it relies upon the same conflation of ontology and epistemology that is made by undergraduates in a history class. When forced to think about it, we presume that we see things the way that they *really* are. We want others to see the facts the same way that we do, especially when we have created a cohesive *Weltanschauung* around our interpretation. Another interpretation, an oppositional induction from the same daedal body of evidence perhaps, represents a challenge not only to our interpretation of appearances but our fundamental ontology—the way we think the world really works.

How does fiction serve to overcome this problem? A work of fiction usually makes no claims to explain the world as it really is; fiction creates and describes only appearances. Although even as I write this, I think this is a false characterization: fiction often tells us how the world is, demonstrates and describes real ontology, often better than non-fiction. (This was my problem with O'Brien's book—I thought it was describing the way the Vietnam conflict *was* rather than merely how it appeared to be.) At least we might believe that, when used in a history class, fiction challenges (1) the claim that history books really get to the comprehensive facts of the matter, and (2) the

[3] Gordon S. Wood, "Colonial correctness," *The New Republic*, June 6 & 13, 2005, 42.

notion that the field of history is an attempt to accumulate documented assemblages of events and memories of events.

A second hurdle we must overcome when using fiction to teach history is wrapped up in the notions of classification attached to mathematical concepts like bounded sets and centered sets, and linguistic concepts like *emic* and *etic*. Let me explain what I mean here.

"Set theory" is a peculiar mathematical concept that, when applied to humans (or any other population), seems to aid in classification. Although it is most often employed in abstract logic, anthropologists have borrowed the concept in their own studies.[4] They flesh out the difference between bounded and centered sets in the following ways.[5]

Bounded sets are:

(1) lists of essential characteristics objects must possess in themselves to warrant inclusion in a set;

(2) defined by clear boundaries—the meaningful question regarding an object to be classified is whether or not it is *in* or *out* of the set;

(3) content-homogenous—i.e., differences between individuals in a set are "read out" and similarities highlighted or "read in";

(4) treated as fundamentally static units;

(5) generally treated as ontological sets and are thought to describe true abstractions or categories.[6]

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[4] Bas Van Fraasen uses a similar model he calls a cluster concept when attempting to delineate population borders and the identification of historical subjects (in this case, scientists). Bas Van Fraasen, *The Empirical Stance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 132–159.
[5] Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Concepts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994).
[6] Ibid., 112–113.

By contrast, so-called "centered" or "cluster" sets are grouped on the basis of relationships instead of essential characteristics.

(1) They are created by defining both a central reference point and the qualifications for relationship of an object to that center.

(2) Centered sets have fuzzy boundaries. What boundaries do exist emerge from the relationship of the object and the center.

(3) They are content-heterogenous, since the variables of a centered set include only the center and the relationship of the object to that center.

(4) Clusters are flexible units; as the center changes the clusters change. Likewise objects that appear to look like the center but have changed direction and are no longer oriented toward the central concept do not have to be included in that center.

(5) Rather than ontological statements about the state of the world, centered sets are structural acknowledgments that the firmest claims are merely epistemic ones. The cluster meets the needs of the study for which it was identified but makes no claims as to the "realness" of the categorization. It is a temporary state assembled for convenience.[7]

Another useful categorization concept employed by linguists and anthropologists is known as the emic/etic distinction. First coined by Ken Pike in the early 1960s, *emic* (from "phonemic") refers to behaviors or linguistic events described in terms meaningful to the actor(s).[8] *Etic* (from "phonetic") accounts of behaviors and linguistic events invoke terms familiar to an outside observer. According to anthropologist Marvin Harris, who popularized Pike's emic/etic distinction, those interested in the local construction of meaning and local rules for behavior will rely on emic

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[7] Ibid., 123–124.

[8] Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Structure of Human Behavior,* 2nd ed. (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton Press, 1967).

accounts; those interested in universal or nomothetic explanations will likely be forced into an etic vocabulary.[9]

What do these two issues (i.e., bounded/center sets and emic/etic distinctions) mean for the relationship between fiction and the field of history? One immediate ramification might be a renewed attention on documents themselves. Denizens of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries exist only in the paper trails they left and the occasional artifact, building, painting, memorabilia, etc. Though they are not, therefore, able to corroborate our rendering of them, we should be sensitive to the potential emic perspectives in their letters, diaries, etc. Likewise, when finding ways to pigeonhole individuals into various larger categories, we should be more than a little aware that these categorizations are our construction—the "real" identities of our historical subjects likely would not have self-identified in precisely the way we have typified them. But should this even be a concern of ours if, as I suggested above, the really-real is pretty near to inaccessible?

Take Sandra Gustafson's portrayal of Jonathan Edwards, for example.[10] While it is arguable whether Edward's wig-donning established him as a preacher intermediate between masculine and feminine identities, it is good to know that such semiotic exchanges were indeed part of the eighteenth century cultural landscape. Unfortunately, we are left with only a scrap of dialogue from Edwards' father-in-law about the significance of gender-bending behavior. More work might be necessary here to establish a truly emic vocabulary and cultural network. Gustafson's approach, however, illuminates alternative readings of events—readings that may enable us to reconstruct a vocabulary recognizable to our historical subjects, though in its current form it makes no bones about being an etic approach.

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[9] Harris first borrowed and adapted Pike's emic/etic distinction in *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1968). His most complete work on the subject is *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publication, 1990).
[10] Sandra Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

I think we *should* be concerned about emic representation, though our attempts to reach the real individuals and processes of history are doomed to a certain amount of obscurity and more than bit of etic restructuring of terminology. In as much as we have backed away from claims of final historical truth, fiction enables us to talk through the mouths of subjects long dead in identity terms nearer to their living selves. In other words, faced with an inability to resuscitate an individual directly from their corpus, writers of historical fiction animate a simulacrum, furnished with a personality, emotions, reactions, reason, and irrational, idiosyncratic behavior. To be sure, this recreation is an enterprise for the etic as well as the emic. When done well, however, we might see in the character a representation unobservable from a mere listing of facts culled from documents or an abstract, bounded, etic category that uses an individual primarily as an illustration.

All of this is well and good for biography. But how do these suggestions I am making work themselves out in histories larger in scope?

Not well, apparently: the notion of etic, bounded sets is used seemingly without compunction in macrohistories. Abstract groupings of individual historical actors whiz through our textbooks causing this, explaining the outcome of that. Single actors described with an attention to emic detail appear not to fit as smoothly into bounded sets. Or rather, when the categories are doing the acting, individuals serve as props. In a grand account of the causes of the American Revolution like Gordon Wood's, race, class, and gender hardly merit mention—something that blacks, poor people, and women who participated in the Revolution might find hard to swallow. Likely centered set models of large-scale historic events would describe the actions and intentions of groups in a manner more faithful to the individuals themselves.

But doesn't the abandonment of etic classifications and large, bounded sets make macrohistory too unwieldy? Perhaps so. What might the field of history be giving up in such a micro-historical turn? Aside from a thin cloak of "certainty" about *the* definable causes of major

events, I am not clear that anything irreplaceable is being lost. "Understanding" the unseen causes of the Revolutionary War, say, is a lucrative and entertaining book industry, but no more historical (if by historical, *closer to knowable events* is meant)—and certainly no less speculative—than microhistories of regions and participants. A broad scale approach does offer a different perspective, an overview. But it also leaves open the temptation to script a story in terms of abstract categories that do not correspond to the actions and thoughts of any individual participants. Well-researched historical fiction, by contrast, places the spotlight on characters that have a link to documents left by an actual person.

Charles Brockden Brown's 1798 novel *Wieland* reconfigures the typical Gothic novel around a dialectical exchange between characters that symbolize opposed eighteenth-century extremes.[11] One character—after whom the book is titled—epitomizes the irrational spiritualist or evangelical; the other, the ultra-rational humanist. Both are subject to the suggestions of Carwin the ventriloquist: i.e., they both hear his voices and act on them. Carwin occupies an unsettling third position—he is amoral, if not immoral, and if not irrational at least responding to whims that make little sense to the narrator-character. As a piece of fiction written more than two centuries ago, *Wieland* unlocks an emic vocabulary. The novel also identifies certain centered concepts—represented in the characters, if one reads between the lines somewhat—useful when attempting to recreate the late-eighteenth century intellectual and political landscape. Because it is a primary source, Brown's book enables us to see centers of historical sets. Because it is a work of fiction, the emotional intensity, the motives, the tattered, unruly past is displayed, animated, and open for our interpretation and vicarious experience.

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[11] Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland* and *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, J. Fliegelman, ed. (New York: Penguin, 1991).

A third hurdle to overcome is the notion that history is *for* something immediate or that history has a function that will improve or, at minimum, inform my immediate future. And we often make the further presumption that the function of the discipline as a whole is to assist someone to do something in the present: the politician to make culturally sensitive social policy, the history professor to know the truth about the past, the museum curator to know how to arrange exhibits around the proper *mythos* that the audience wants or needs to see. Or more vaguely: to help the present not be like the bad parts of the past (a progressivist or romantic view) and/or to help the present to be more like the good parts of the past (a traditionalist or romantic view). The difference between history and fiction by this account, then, is that fiction's only function is to entertain or force one to emote.

An alternative to the view that history has a society-enriching function and that fiction does not is to assert that history is merely descriptive and serves no function other than that of the conservation of memories about events. Or worse, that the discipline of history functions within the university analogously to a virus—co-opting the space and resources of a living cell to replicate itself until resources run out.

If historians use fiction to tell history, doesn't this suggest that history is primarily for entertainment, either of the reading public or of the academy? Not necessarily. I think history *does* have a function. The misnomer lies in the fact that benefits of history are not necessarily *directly* relevant to the reader. The most important benefits of reading and experiencing history are often subjective and slow to reveal themselves—yet nonetheless profound. Fiction rooted in history like Madison Smartt Bell's *All Soul's Rising* adds flesh and bone and a raw emotional energy to a historical narrative that without it might be as marginalized as the people groups involved in the history's

making.[12] The function, then—the relevancy— is that history helps us to understand and appreciate the distinctiveness of those who have come before us, who lived sometimes radically different lives from the ones we lead.

There is another aspect to the doing of history that hangs around unspoken in the background, silently lurking in the shadows between the pages, underneath the dust jackets, sublimating or denigrating an entire project in the manner of an ancient muse. Philosophical anthropology attempts to illuminate, however partially, the notion that there is something about what it means to be human that hides in the chthonic levels of every individual and culture, too deep for a way-of-knowing as superficial as science to excavate. Every book written in the service of history, whether or not it means to, functions as a tacit, temporally contextualized philosophical anthropology. This claim seems to be true of both biography and sweeping surveys—and probably everything in between. There are differences between inhabitants of the past and ourselves; and there is something we have in common.

Will Irvine, a leading light in the histories of Darwin and Huxley, purportedly said that humans are no more and no less than angels in the bodies of apes.[13] He was likely not the only one to make such a claim since the biological origins of humankind came to light in the eighteenth century. If this angels-in-apes story is the case with us humans (making a possible exception for Southern Californians, for whom the inverse characterization no doubt holds), then at minimum the field of history must be a concerted attempt at explaining not only the reasonable and rational but the irrational and unreasoned. We are angelic; we are demonic; we are unreasoning beasts. What might a species of historical philosophical anthropology look and feel like?

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[12] In this case, the people are eighteenth century Haitians. Madison Smartt Bell, *All Soul's Rising* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
[13] William Irvine, *Apes, Angels, and Victorians: Darwin, Huxley, and Evolution* (New York: Time, Inc., 1963).

I think my dad killed himself ten years ago out of shame more than anything. Shame that he was ordinary, that he was unable to transcend his own faults, his own fears, his own insignificance in relation to the broader world around him. He did not feel much like the angelic part of him had any control over the bestial. Despite the intensity of the emotions that must have propelled him in that final sequence of ineffable and irretrievable moments, the only "history" that remains—the only documentation that a historian might piece together into a narrative—is a vague, feebly scrawled note written on his favorite manila tablet paper and a stark, black and white death certificate. Even if you knew the man, this isn't much to write from. Yet, it is when considering the *how* and *why* and *what's left* of my dad's death, and the paucity of what remains of his life, that I begin to glimpse the anthropological significance of "fictional" history in all its permutations.

Those intense moments that seem to cut across distinctions of gender, ethnicity, class, and education happen in the disarticulated and unrecoverable joints of history at least as much as in the somewhat tangible documentary scaffolding. (They are there, too—otherwise the field of history would be little more than storytelling or antiquarianism—just not to the same extent.) Letters, diaries, and memoirs are culled and shaped; emotions may be controlled, hidden within particular turns of phrase, or, as in my dad's case, piquant but distorted. The documents significant to a social historian—censuses, court records, lists and charts—speak clearly only about the areas they were set up to tabulate. There's so much left unsaid, undocumented. The viscera of history, dark moments of despair and indecision, doubt and fear, remain slippery and elusive in the documents themselves—even though these emotions are just about the only universal aspects of humanity. For the most part, historians must read feeling into history. But the feeling, the intensity of pain and sorrow, joy and elation, misery and hope—these are common elements that undergird every historical event worth remembering.

Unless we (like Gordon Wood perhaps) are historian-Calvinists, we recognize that even the "big" questions about economics, politics, the causes of wars, etc., collapse into mundane decisions made by insecure people wrangling with massive, unassailable emotions and drives—greed, shame, doubt, fear, awe, joy, grief. History is fashioned from centered sets of individuals going about their quite ordinary lives rather than clunky boxes or members of precisely enumerated abstract categories to be shuffled around some causal-temporal checkerboard. When necessarily fictive or, rather, imaginative accounts of these emotions are woven together with documentation—the so-called evidence of historical fact—the result is an anthropological narrative of the past. This emotionally rich narrative, an *All Soul's Rising* or even a *Wieland*, suffers from the same epistemic uncertainty as all other historical accounts. It is partial: incomplete and skewed toward a single, relatively narrow perspective. But the narrative remains ontologically superior: the richness of emotion, even imaginatively framed emotion, helps us to understand ourselves, to empathize with our fellow humans, and to give the field of history a function above its own self-preservation.

How do I teach history using fiction? I might start by: (1) pointing out the proximity, epistemically speaking, of professional works in history to fiction, (2) problemitizing the use of abstract, bounded categories that would mean little to our historical subjects in our reconstructions of the past, (3) teaching students to question the function of history in general and individual studies in particular, and (4) insisting that every work of history is concomitantly an implicit commentary on what it means to be human. Ultimately, I would like to pass on the lesson that the history we study and write should illuminate those things that are common to all of us—namely intense emotions like shame, despair, jubilation, hope, and fear—in order to help us understand, appreciate, and even celebrate what appears to differentiate and divide us. This lesson, it seems to me anyway, is the Thing red-capped Tim O'Brien would want me to carry.