

INTRODUCTION

In 1938, if you had a dollar and seventy-two cents, you could buy a copy of *The Rise of American Democracy*, a seven-hundred-page hardcover about the size of a biggish Bible or a Boy Scout Handbook. While a Bible's worth is hard to measure, the scout guide, at fifty cents, was an awfully good bargain and an excellent book to have on hand if you were shipwrecked on a desert island, not least because it included a chapter on How to Make Fire without Matches. But *The Rise of American Democracy* promised, invaluablely, "to make clear how Americans have come to live and to believe as they do." It is also a very good read. "A Simple Book," its ad copy boasted. "Paragraphs average three to a page. Sentences are short." Better yet: "A Democracy Theme runs through the whole text."

The Rise of American Democracy was written by Mabel B. Casner, a Connecticut schoolteacher, and Ralph Henry Gabriel, a Yale professor of intellectual history, in 1937. In those dark days, with Fascism, not democracy, on the rise, Casner and Gabriel offered a wise and sober historian's creed: "We live today in perilous times; so did many of our forefathers. They sometimes made mistakes; let us strive to learn not to repeat these errors. The generations which lived before us left us a heritage of noble ideals; let us hold fast to these." Above all, they wanted students to understand the idea of democracy. But the book is also full of practical teaching tips and "Real life activities"—tested by Casner in her classroom in West

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Haven, Connecticut—which, while “not to be followed slavishly,” were supplied at the end of every chapter, and included instructions for an end-of-year finale, a class play, “The Rise of American Democracy: A Dramatization in Four Scenes,” to be performed some cool June afternoon. It opens with a closed curtain:

Enter COLUMBIA from one side and BOY from Europe from the opposite side.

Boy. I am looking for Columbia. Do you know where I could find her?

Columbia. I am she.

Boy (*bowing*). I am happy and honored to make your acquaintance. I come from Europe. I have heard much of your democracy. I have come to you to find out what it is like. . . .

Columbia. I shall be glad to show you. Perhaps the best way is to go on a journey through American history. (*Exit both together*)

The curtain rises on the Constitutional Convention, where Columbia and the earnest young European watch the delegates conclude their deliberations. Next, Columbia takes her awestruck European student of democracy to “the Western plains in the 1840’s” to witness a shambles of bedraggled pioneers scuffle across the stage in the play’s pitched climax, which combines singing, cowboy costumes, and even parts for pets, as per the sociable stage direction: “*dogs may be added.*”

“I understand that they are settling your great continent,” the boy says, “but I do not understand what they have to do with democracy.”

“They have only a few belongings and simple tools,” Columbia points out, but “They are building a democratic nation. Men do not have to have possessions to do great things.”¹

No matter if the scenery toppled, if the pioneers tripped in their boots, if the dogs barked and bayed; everyone in the

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audience was treated to a concise restatement of the then-dominant interpretation of the rise of American democracy: that it was fueled by the settling of the frontier and that it chiefly involved the hardscrabble striving of the poor.

What accounts for the rise of American democracy? Casner and Gabriel tried to answer that question by staging a play, by telling a story. That was a good idea. The United States got its start as a story. It begins: “When in the course of human events” It has a moral: “All men are created equal.” It even has a villain, George III, on whose machinations the plot turns: “The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.”

To say that the United States is a story is not to say that it is fiction; it is, instead, to suggest that it follows certain narrative conventions. All nations are places, but they are also acts of imagination. Who has a part in a nation’s story, like who can become a citizen and who has a right to vote, isn’t foreordained, or even stable. The story’s plot, like the nation’s borders and the nature of its electorate, is always shifting. Laws are passed and wars are fought to keep some people in and others out. Who tells the story, like who writes the laws and who wages the wars, is always part of that struggle.

Consider the Declaration of Independence. In March 1776, two months before John Adams was appointed to serve with Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman, on a committee charged with drafting a declaration of independence, Abigail Adams wrote a letter to her husband. “I long to hear that you have declared an independency,” she began.

And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember

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the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.²

Adams wrote back in April. “As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh,” he began. “We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bonds of government everywhere; that children and apprentices were disobedient; that schools and colleges were grown turbulent; that Indians slighted their guardians, and negroes grew insolent to their masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe, more numerous and powerful than all the rest, were grown discontented.” He refused to take her story—about the rule of men over women—seriously. “Depend upon it,” he resolved, “we know better than to repeal our masculine systems.”³

The story of America isn’t carved in stone, or even inked on parchment; it is, instead, told, and fought over, again and again. It could have gone a thousand other ways. Even the Declaration of Independence could have gone a thousand other ways. In June and into the first days of July, it went through draft after draft. In his original draft, Jefferson, a slave owner, included a breathless paragraph in which he blamed the king for slavery (“He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery”), for his thwarting of colonial efforts to abolish the slave trade (“determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce”), and for support

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for proclamations promising freedom to slaves who joined the British army (“he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he had deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another”).⁴

Jefferson’s fellow delegates could not abide it. To some, it went too far; to others, it didn’t go half far enough. It was struck out almost entirely.

If Adams had listened to his wife, if Jefferson had prevailed, if a thousand other things had gone a thousand other ways, the Declaration of Independence would have come out differently. Instead, the story told in the Declaration of Independence established the equality of all men (but not of women), decried tyranny (but not slavery), and chronicled the king’s “long train of abuses and usurpations” to justify what was otherwise treason as necessary to the colonists’ “future security.” It used the past to make an argument about the future.

The Declaration of Independence is exceptionally beautiful as a piece of writing and as a statement of political philosophy, but using the past to make an argument about the future is far from exceptional; it is, instead, a feature of political rhetoric, always and everywhere. Politics involves elections and votes and money and power, but the heart of politics is describing how things came to be the way they are in such a way as to convince people that you know how to make things the way they ought to be.

This is curious, and worth pondering, because it reveals how much politics has in common with history. Politics is a story about the relationship between the past and the future; history is a story about the relationship between the past and the present. It’s what history and politics share—a vantage on the past—that makes writing the history of politics fraught. And it’s what

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they don't share that makes the study of history vital. Politics is accountable to opinion; history is accountable to evidence.

Consider the history of American democracy. Democracy in America was not established with the stroke of a pen, in 1776, when members of the Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence. Nor was it established in 1787, when delegates to the Constitutional Convention signed the Constitution. The rise of American democracy was neither inevitable nor swift. It countered prevailing political philosophy. If democracy is rule by the people and if the people are, as Federalists like John Adams believed, "the common Herd of Mankind"—the phrase was a commonplace—then democracy is the government of the worst, the tyranny of the idle, the ignorant, and the ill informed. Alexander Hamilton reasoned that there are but two types of men: "The first are rich and well-born, the other the mass of the people." The rich are wise, the masses fickle. "Give, therefore, to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government," Hamilton recommended. "They will check the unsteadiness of the second."⁵ These are the principles that informed the framers of the Constitution.

In the 1790s, Federalists kept on telling that same story, the story told in the Constitution, about well-born and well-educated men regulating the passions of the common herd; in that story, democracy was bad. Followers of Thomas Jefferson told a different story, much like that told in the Declaration of Independence, about the people rising up against tyranny: "He that is not a Democrat is an aristocrat," they said.⁶ The election of 1800, the "revolution of 1800," was a battle between these two stories.

The "contest of opinion," as Jefferson called it, was waged in the pages of the nation's newspapers. (There were, at the time, no presidential debates and very few speeches. Americans considered politicians putting themselves so far forward to be unforgivably tacky. When Adams took a roundabout route, wending his way from Massachusetts to the nation's

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brand-new capital city through Pennsylvania and Maryland, a journey that looked suspiciously like campaigning, a Jeffersonian newspaper editor asked, “Why must the President go fifty miles out of his way to make a trip to Washington?”⁷ In newspapers, Adams was generally caricatured as a monarch and Jefferson as an atheist. The Philadelphia *Aurora*, an organ of Jefferson’s party, suggested that electing Adams, the incumbent, would mean keeping “Things As They Are”:

The principles and patriots of the *Revolution* condemned.
The *Nation* in arms without a foe, and divided without a cause.
The reign of terror created by false alarms, to promote domestic
feud and foreign war.
A Sedition Law.
An established church, a religious test, and an order of
Priesthood.

But electing Jefferson would lead to a different future, described as “Things As They Will Be”:

The Principles of the *Revolution* restored.
The *Nation* at peace with the world and united in itself.
Republicanism allaying the fever of domestic feuds, and subdu-
ing the opposition by the force of reason and rectitude.
The Liberty of the Press.
Religious liberty, the rights of conscience, no priesthood, truth,
and Jefferson.⁸

The next day, a Federalist paper called the *Gazette of the United States* ran, on its front page, this piece:

THE GRAND QUESTION STATED

At the present solemn and momentous epoch, the only question to be asked by every American, laying his hand on his heart is: “Shall I continue in allegiance to

GOD—AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT:

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Or impiously declare for
JEFFERSON—AND NO GOD!!!!⁹

Jeffersonians described the choice as between war and peace; Federalists pit Jefferson against God.

Jefferson won, and Jeffersonianism prevailed. But what the election really did was establish two-party politics. Then came Jacksonianism. In the 1820s and 1830s, “democracy” was, for the first time, no longer a slur. New states entering the union adopted new and more democratic constitutions—and then old states revised their constitutions—calling for more direct and frequent elections, and eliminating property requirements for voting. By defining voters as white men, they defined women and black men as outside the electorate. A new kind of politics emerged, tied to party (candidates even began to campaign), arrayed against certain kinds of moneyed privilege (like the national bank), in the thrall of other kinds (like state banks), and with the questions of slavery, Indian sovereignty, and immigration entirely—and brutally—unresolved.

In the lifetime of an American born in 1760 and dead in 1860, the proportion of white men who were eligible to vote grew from less than half to nearly all. This sweeping redefinition of suffrage was unheard of, an astonishing political novelty; it seemed to call for a wholly new understanding of history.¹⁰ Even as it was happening, people wondered what was driving it, and where it would lead. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1831—“*I wish to find out for myself what your American democracy is like,*” says *the European to Columbia*—he concluded that American democracy followed from American equality. “The more I advanced in the study of American society,” he wrote, “the more I perceived that this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived.” As Tocqueville saw it, a nation of men possessed of roughly equal estates and education must

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necessarily become a nation of men possessed of roughly equal political rights. “To conceive of men remaining forever unequal upon a single point, yet equal on all others, is impossible; they must come in the end to be equal upon all.”¹¹

In 1842, Charles Dickens traveled to the United States to discover American democracy, too. Unlike Tocqueville, he left bitterly disillusioned. “This is not the Republic I came to see,” he wrote home. “This is not the Republic of my imagination.”¹² Dickens found slavery sinister, the American people coarse, and American politics grotesque. He thought the story of America was a lie. By what his friend Thomas Carlyle called “Yankeedoodledum”—American bumptiousness—Dickens was amused but, more, offended.¹³ He was especially disgusted by the party system, which he described as nothing so much as “the intrusion of the most pitiful, mean, malicious, creeping, crawling, sneaking party spirit into all transactions of life.”¹⁴

There were more kinds of critics, too, including abolitionists, suffragists, and peace activists: people who pointed out the limits of American democracy. “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?” Frederick Douglass asked in 1852:

I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sound of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence; your shout of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanks-givings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.¹⁵

In 1879, a newspaperman named Henry George published a book called *Progress and Poverty*; it went on to become the

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most widely read American economic treatise of the nineteenth century. George saw himself as defending “the Republicanism of Jefferson and the Democracy of Jackson” and argued that both were under assault by speculative, industrial capitalism. The poor were getting poorer and the rich were getting richer. Agreeing with Tocqueville that equality of condition had made democracy possible, George argued that inequality of condition was making democracy impossible.¹⁶

The historian Frederick Jackson Turner thought that democracy was at risk, too, if for a different reason: the United States was running out of wilderness. In 1893, in an essay called “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Turner argued that the frontier had made democracy possible. From colonial days onward, Turner argued, demands for fuller political participation—for local governance, more frequent elections, and broader suffrage—had come from scrappy, bull-headed frontier settlers bridling, and thumbing their noses, at the authority of eastern elites. “A fool can sometimes put on his coat better than a wise man can do it for him,” they told royal governors and, later, state legislators and, most of all, the federal government. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution may have been drafted on the shores of the Atlantic, Turner conceded, but they were tested in the foothills of the Alleghenies and beyond. “This, at least, is clear,” Turner insisted, “American democracy is fundamentally the outcome of the experiences of the American people in dealing with the West.”¹⁷

Turner’s thesis influenced decades of American historical interpretation. Turner is why, in Gabriel and Casner’s play, those Western settlers shuffle across the stage, dogs nipping at their heels. Turner saw American history as a battle between “savagery” and “civilization,” and his thesis influenced, among other things, the founding of new university departments, as did the work of Charles Beard, whose best-selling 1927 book,

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The Rise of American Civilization, written with his wife Mary Ritter Beard, located the origins of American politics in economic conflict.¹⁸ In 1937, the year Casner and Gabriel finished writing *The Rise of American Democracy*, Harvard founded a graduate program called the “History of American Civilization.” Brown University followed in 1945. That same year, in *The Age of Jackson*, Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., suggested that Turner’s frontier thesis “is not perhaps so pat a case as some have thought.” Following the Beards, Schlesinger believed that the rise of American democracy was the result of class struggle. For Schlesinger, this was a struggle of ideas, and even of stories.¹⁹

This debate went on and on. In 1948, Columbia historian Richard Hofstadter, then thirty-two, published twelve essays with the title *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*. Hofstadter thought Turner, the Beards, and Schlesinger were wrong. Telling the stories of American statesmen from Jefferson to FDR, Hofstadter argued that, for all their differences, these men shared a belief in the sanctity of private property, the value of economic opportunity, and the importance of competition.²⁰

Hofstadter was groping to explain the origins of America. (“It is imperative in time of cultural crisis to gain fresh perspectives on the past,” he insisted.)²¹ So were very many other scholars. In 1946, Ralph Henry Gabriel founded a department at Yale called American Studies, whose purpose was “to achieve a broad understanding of American civilization—its origins, evolution and present world relationships.” (Gabriel went on to found the American Studies Association.) A generation of historians attempted to define what made Americans American. Meanwhile, a generation of politicians tried to ferret out which Americans were un-American. Yale’s American Studies program was utterly bound up with the politics of the Cold War. In 1950, the university accepted a \$500,000 donation

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stipulating that the American Studies department “provide for more general understanding of the fact of American history and the fundamental principles of American freedom in the field of politics, and of economics” in order to combat “the menace of foreign philosophies.” Gabriel resigned in protest. The donor then demanded that the new chair be a professor “who firmly believes in the preservation of our System of Free Enterprise and is opposed to the system of State Socialism, Communism and Totalitarianism.”²²

At mid-century, even as the Civil Rights movement offered a searing critique of stories about the rise of American democracy, American historical writing was strikingly sweeping in its claims about American origins. In 1965, Bernard Bailyn, then forty-three, delivered three masterful lectures in which he argued for the importance of institutions and ideas—not land, or leaders—in shaping politics. The lectures were published with the title *The Origins of American Politics*.²³

In the decades following the Second World War, graduate programs in American history, American civilization, and American studies thrived. But by the end of the 1960s, more and more students enrolling in these programs were interested in studying the experiences of the vast number of people left out of their advisers’ work—women and children, slaves and free blacks, servants and immigrants. These younger scholars produced a great deal of invaluable scholarship, but, in it, they turned away from questions like “What are the origins of American politics?” believing that even to ask that sort of question was to participate in Cold War consensus-style intellectual conformity.

The study of neglected groups exploded. Black studies, women’s studies, and ethnic studies programs were founded. By the 1970s, critics charged that scholars were writing more and more about less and less for fewer and fewer. “The great proliferation of historical writing has served not to illuminate

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the central themes of Western history but to obscure them,” Bailyn complained in 1981, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association. There followed similarly heartfelt laments by Eric Foner, Herbert Gutman, and Thomas Bender.²⁴ Schlesinger offered a jeremiad of his own in 1992 in *The Disuniting of America*, bemoaning “militant multiculturalism.”²⁵ Meanwhile, during the very years that many historians within the academy were refusing to entertain questions about origins, a theory of constitutional interpretation called “originalism” gained sway among people outside of it; by the end of the twentieth century, originalism had come to dominate the jurisprudence of the U.S. Supreme Court, where it determined the outcome of landmark rulings on everything from the ownership of firearms to the funding of political campaigns.

In 1994, when I was in graduate school at Yale, in the American Studies Program that Ralph Henry Gabriel had founded half a century before, the ugliest battle of what came to be called the “history wars” took place in the nation’s capital: after a team of academic historians prepared a set of national history standards, the U.S. Senate rejected them, condemning the proposed curriculum as nothing more than politics masquerading as history.²⁶ In the wake of this crisis, a great many scholars reflected on the future of the teaching and writing of history in the United States. The American Historical Association and the American Studies Association held forums. Speeches were made; opinion essays were published. Many fine articles and books were written, including *The Story of American Freedom*, a book of rare scope and subtlety, in which Columbia University historian Eric Foner traced the fitful and often bloody struggle over the meaning of freedom during the course of American history.²⁷ Princeton historian Sean Wilentz’s answer to the call for synthesis was *The Rise of American Democracy: From Jefferson to Lincoln*. Wilentz rejected Turner’s

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thesis about the wind of democracy blowing from the West (“In fact,” Wilentz argued, “the West borrowed heavily from eastern examples”), but, more, he hoped to reaffirm “the importance of political events, ideas, and leaders to democracy’s rise—once an all-too-prevalent assumption, now in need of some repair and rescue.”²⁸

There had been a drift. In the years between Casner and Gabriel’s *Rise of American Democracy* in 1938 and Wilentz’s *Rise of American Democracy* in 2005, American history books had changed. Their explanations had become more qualified, and their answers to questions like “What accounts for the rise of American democracy?” had grown vague, doubtful, and conflicted. More often, those questions were no longer asked, at first, because they were too big, and, later, because they were too small. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, advocates of global history dismissed the study of the nation-state as a variety of intellectual provincialism, leaving elementary and secondary school teachers to teach local, state, and national history without the benefit of a rigorous scholarship. Within the academic world, the study of American origins became remarkably unfashionable. Haunted by the knowledge of all that any single study leaves out—all the people, the conflict, the messiness, the obeisance to all the other scholarship—intimidated by ideological attacks, eager to disavow origins stories, and profoundly suspicious, as a matter of critical intelligence, of the rhetorical power of the storyteller, the ambit of academic writing kept getting smaller. So did its readership.

I began writing the essays in this book in 2005, not long after I started teaching at Harvard. All but one of these essays first appeared in *The New Yorker*. I wrote them because I wanted to learn how to tell stories better. But mostly I wrote them

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because I wanted to try to explain how history works, and how it's different from politics.

History is the art of making an argument about the past by telling a story accountable to evidence. In the writing of history, a story without an argument fades into antiquarianism; an argument without a story risks pedantry. Writing history requires empathy, inquiry, and debate. It requires forswearing condescension, cant, and nostalgia. The past isn't quaint. Much of it, in fact, is bleak. Also, what people will tell you about the past is very often malarkey. The essays in this book concern documents—things like travel narratives, the Constitution, ballots, the inaugural address, the presidential biography, the campaign biography, the I.O.U., and the dime novel. Historical inquiry relies on standards of evidence because documents aren't to be trusted. John Smith, the swashbuckling founder of Virginia, titled an account of his adventures *True Travels*, even though he made most of it up. One way to read this book, then, is as a study of the American tall tale. My advice is to keep one eyebrow cocked and watch out for shifty-looking characters with ink-stained hands and narrators who keep ducking into doorways, especially while reading about *The Life of Jackson*, the wildly fictitious campaign biography of Andrew Jackson; Edgar Allan Poe's "Philosophy of Composition," a pack of lies; and the hopelessly hyperbolic *Life and Adventures of Kit Carson . . . from Facts Narrated by Himself*.

I didn't write the essays in this book with an eye toward offering a novel interpretation of American history. Still, it strikes me that, taken together, they do make an argument, and it is this: the rise of American democracy is bound up with the history of reading and writing, which is one of the reasons the study of American history is inseparable from the study of American literature. In the early United States, literacy rates rose and the price of books and magazines and newspapers fell during the same decades that suffrage was being extended.

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With everything from constitutions and ballots to almanacs and novels, Americans wrote and read their way into a political culture inked and stamped and pressed in print.

I've stitched all these essays together here, like the pieces of a quilt, and I've arranged them chronologically, from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first. They cover the length of American history; by no means do they cover its breadth. This book does not tell "the story of America." No one can write that story. This is, instead, a study of the story.

In *American Notes*, Charles Dickens's account of his travels in the United States, he explained that he regarded politics with a jaundiced eye: "I have seen elections for borough and county, and have never been impelled (no matter which party won) to damage my hat by throwing it up into the air in triumph, or to crack my voice by shouting forth any reference to our Glorious Constitution, to the noble purity of our independent voters, or, the unimpeachable integrity of our independent members." Perhaps, he admitted, he suffered "from some imperfect development of my organ of veneration."²⁹

This defect is not uncommon. "I have no desire to add to a literature of hero worship and national self-congratulation which is already large," Richard Hofstadter explained in the introduction to *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*.³⁰ Neither do I. Instead, mindful of Casner and Gabriel's creed, I have tried to cherish ideas worth cherishing and to question ideas that need questioning. I have tried to do that, here, by studying stories, and by telling them.