

ARTICLE

THE EYE AND THE MIND: MARY CHEVES WEST PERKY, IMAGINATIVE PHENOMENOLOGY, AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF REVERSE HALLUCINATION

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ABSTRACT

Revisiting the remarkable experimental work of the pioneering early twentieth-century psychologist Mary Cheves West Perky (1875–1940), this article argues for the historiographical significance of her counterintuitive findings concerning the human imagination and the phenomenon of “reverse hallucination.” By means of an exhaustive and forensic archival inquiry, this article reconstructs Perky’s heretofore (essentially) unknown biography, providing new insights into the context and broader importance of her research, both with respect to the history of the human sciences and in relation to the history of American artistic modernism. At the same time, these pages recursively deploy her distinctive perspective on the way the perceptual experiences of reality inosculate with projective fantasy, activating her findings as a component of a nontraditional disciplinary practice.

Keywords: Perky Effect, introspection, metahistory, fabulation, hallucination, archival practices

I

We can imagine things—“see” them inside our minds. This is a very natural and common thing, but if one stops and thinks about it for a moment, it is also a somewhat peculiar—even paradoxical—activity/phenomenon. One can run a few simple introspective experiments that highlight some of the weirdness of the “images” (or whatever they are) inside our heads. For instance, put down whatever it is that you have before you by which these words are entering into your eyes and

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look straight up for five seconds. (Do not do this if it is sunny and noon where you are, okay?) Then, close your eyes, return your head to some comfortable position, and take some time to “look” at the “image” of whatever you just saw. Do some “interrogation” of the representation you hold in your head. What is in the lower right quadrant? What was the configuration of forms at the extreme edge of your visual field in this sector? Can you “see” this edge “in” the representation you are considering with your eyes closed? How clearly can you “see” it? Try something else. Take the most prominent visible “object” that presented itself in that field when you were looking. Consider its form in your mind-image. What color was/is it? Could you trace its contour now, if you had to, on a sheet of paper?

A little of this sort of pragmatic investigation of your memory-images will likely produce some measure of puzzlement. Speaking for myself, there can be no doubt that my *sense* of what is in my head is very “photo-like.” I *think* it is possessed by those qualities of “conjointness” and “scalar accessibility” that characterize our visual experience of both photographic representation and reality: there are no notable “holes” in the visible field; there is a sense that further scrutiny in any zone will be rewarded by additional information (at least up to a point). But although the image I have in my head after looking straight up and then closing my eyes *feels to me* like it has this quality, a little imagination-work upon it reveals that this is an *illusion*. In fact, the image-thing in my head (the “memory image”) is a very odd tissue of *mostly nothing*. When I actually scrutinize it, it comes apart completely, and I realize that something in my mind is deceiving me about the reliability and completeness of the “picture” I think I hold in my head.²

Those who study vision and perception in a systematic way would be quick to point out that *actual vision in the world* works in much the same way. We have a strong sense that we are seeing it all clearly—but there are a lot of experiments (many of them quite charismatic—and a few, like the notorious gorilla-walking-through-the-ball-game-video, are genuinely funny) that point up how greatly we overestimate our visual command over the world around us.

The remarkable experiments of Mary Cheves West Perky in the early twentieth century lie at this crossroad of imagination and perception. She made trouble for traffic in all directions, and her work remains controversial among philosophers, psychologists, and cognitive scientists of various stripes.³

Working in the relatively new (and prolific) laboratory for experimental psychology at Cornell University, Perky undertook a formal program of investigations into the nature of the imagination. For starters, she configured a kind of proto-television screen situation: a sheet of frosted glass onto which light could

2. I will bracket, for present purposes, a dense collection of phenomenological scholarship that works the problem of memory, attention, and vision. But the classic psychological study remains rich (and closely connected to the history of the scientific study of attention itself): F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1932; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

3. For an introduction to Perky, and the legacy of her work, see David Waller, Jeffrey R. Schweitzer, J. Ryan Brunton, and Roger M. Knudson, “A Century of Imagery Research: Reflections on Cheves Perky’s Contribution to Our Understanding of Mental Imagery,” *American Journal of Psychology* 125, no. 3 (2012), 291–305.

be projected from behind. The viewer sat in front of this translucent “window,” which had been fitted into the wall dividing a viewing room from a (hidden) projection room. By precise manipulation of a series of gels and scrims, and by controlling the brightness of the projecting light source, Perky and her collaborators were able to create very subtle shifts in the hue and luminosity of the screen as seen from the viewing side.⁴ Importantly, however, under resting conditions, with the projection room quiescent, the plate of glass gave no hint of what lay behind it—an innocent person in the viewing room had every reason to think that he or she was simply *looking at a (region of a) wall*.⁵

Under experimental conditions, Perky and her collaborators turned this subtle arrangement into something like a surreptitious puppet show by means of a series of boards featuring stencil-like cutouts in various shapes: a tomato, a banana, a leaf, a book, and so on. Hanging these boards on a kind of clothesline mounted back in the projection booth, Perky made it possible to slide one of these boards into the beam of light shining onto the back of the glass plate. The effect, to a viewer looking at the ground-glass screen from the other side, was a luminous apparition in the given form—and with a little ingenuity (and two operators), simultaneous swaps in the colored gels meant that the banana ghost-form could be yellow, the leaf ghost-form could be green, and all the forms could have a conventional hue.

With that pair of experimenters back in the room ready to manipulate the slide-forms and the light, a third experimenter would sit a test subject in a chair placed about twenty-five feet from the ground-glass screen, which was marked off by a noticeable frame. The room wasn't dark, and neither was the screen. The whole thing had been configured in such a way as to present a sort of neutral luminosity. A white dot marked the center of the (seemingly opaque) glass plate/screen, and the test subject was asked to regard this spot intently.

While he or she was thus “fixated,” the experimenter sitting beside the subject made a request: “imagine” a tomato.

Back in the booth, meanwhile, the accomplices had the “tomato” cutout in place and the tomato-red gels all cued up in front of the projection lamp (which was, as yet, not projecting). Gradually, as the subject worked to bring a tomato to mind, the projectionists in the booth slowly brought up the brightness of the projecting lamp until the very *faintest* apparition of a red tomato-shape swam into view on the ground-glass screen.

I say “swam into view” in a denotative, as opposed to a poetic, sense because the theater of the experiment required that the experimenter who had charge of the cutout boards lightly *swing* the chosen board as it hung before the beam—so as to

4. I am here reconstructing the experiments detailed in Cheves West Perky, “An Experimental Study of Imagination,” *American Journal of Psychology* 21, no. 3 (1910), 422–52.

5. A few details on the precise configuration of all this: the plate of ground glass set into the wall was a rectangle (1 by 1.5 meters); on the projection-room side, this was stopped-down, by means of shuttering, to a region 36 cm square that could be illuminated by means of a series of scrimmed and filtered incandescent lamps. Interestingly, the initial state of the experimental configuration involved balancing the light in the observation room and the luminosity projected on the ground-glass screen “in such a way that the open square should appear just noticeably colored” (Perky, “An Experimental Study of Imagination,” 429).

give the spectral form an ever-so-slight and woozy oscillation. One other feature of the experimental scenario warrants mention: each of those inverse silhouettes had been carefully “dressed” with gauzy layers of something like tulle in such a way as to soften the edges of the projected form—to make the faint and faintly colored image more dreamlike and liminal.

What happened next was quite amazing and has held the attention of philosophers, psychologists, and art-dreamers ever since.⁶

Perky and her collaborators first ran the experiment on three children—two girls, ages thirteen and fourteen, and a boy of ten. The older girl, who went first, was sequenced through six different imagination scenarios. This became the standard protocol for all the subjects to come: first a tomato, then a book, a banana, an orange, a leaf, and finally a lemon. In each case, she was asked to *imagine* the object and told that, when she had an image of the object in mind, she should let the experimenter know and begin to describe what she “saw” in her mind’s eye (though her actual eyes were open). Only then would the two hidden experimentalists in the projection booth begin their little dance, gradually bringing up the luminosity of their lamp and thereby slowly brightening a ghost-glow of the object in question on the screen—in color (red tomato, blue book, dark yellow banana, orange orange, green leaf, and light-yellow lemon). Multiple calibrating experiments, run in advance of the first real trial, had established the threshold at which the projected images came to be visible to the eyes of a person seated at the established distance. Yes, there was some variation, but there was also a clear “below the threshold” zone—and a clear “above the threshold” zone as well.

So, here is the weird thing that happened (first for that fourteen-year-old girl, and then for nearly every one of the several dozen subsequent test subjects): even when the projected image crested into the definitely visible range of brightness (which is to say, *even as a big red tomato floated into view directly before the eyes of a conscious human being*), the person in the chair continued to think she was “imagining” a tomato—indeed, imaging the very tomato she was “seeing.”

The effect was robust. Across nearly thirty iterations of the experimental sequence conducted on Cornell undergraduates, Perky recorded many utterly bizarre responses. For instance, one subject commented aloud, with surprise, that their mental image of the leaf looked like a single-lobed elm leaf when they had *thought* they were trying to imagine the spiky three-part leaf of a maple tree. Another noted that the banana they came to see in their imagination was upright, as if hanging from a tree, even though their initial mental image of a banana had been horizontal, as if lying on a table.

Yes, several subjects commented on the brightness and specificity of the images, saying such things as “It is more distinct than I usually do [that is, more distinct than the images I usually have in my head]; but I have never tried much” and “It seems strange; because you see so many colors, and know that they are

6. Consider, for instance, Adam Reeves and Catherine Craver-Lemley, “Unmasking the Perky Effect,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (August 2012), 1–7. Also of interest is the sharp exchange in Robert Hopkins, “What Perky Did Not Show,” *Analysis* 72, no. 3 (2012), 431–39, and the reply in Bence Nanay, “The Philosophical Implications of the Perky Experiments: Reply to Hopkins,” *Analysis* 72, no. 3 (2012), 439–43.

in your mind; and yet they look like shadows.”⁷ But, with the exception of a handful of instances in which a bumble in the projection room (a sound, a glint of light) gave away the game, Perky reported that every single subject explicitly confirmed that the images he or she was “seeing” were *mental*, *imaginative* images: “I am imagining it all; it’s all imagination,” explained one.⁸ And Perky recorded a number of similar declarations: “I get thinking of it, and it turns up”; “I can get it steadily so long as I keep my mind absolutely on it.”⁹ Even a series of test subjects drawn from graduate students actively working in experimental psychology (who might have been primed to be more suspicious of their perceptions, and of the experimental scenario) had full-bodied experiences of “seeing” the stimulus images in their imaginations and actively denied that they were seeing an image in the physical world—going so far as to express incredulity when, later, the structure of the experiment was revealed. Some even expressed a little sadness. The thirteen-year-old girl, the second official test subject, had loved the experiment—loved the lively imagination she felt she had as she was prompted to call the objects to mind. She was a little brokenhearted to learn of the trick.

It is one thing to observe a paradoxical or unexpected experimental result. It is another to establish that it is a repeatable and even reliable effect. Coming up with some sort of interpretation or explanation is something else entirely. The “Perky Effect,” as it came to be called, is definitely real. It has been reproduced in a variety of subsequent experimental scenarios. But what does it *mean*? What is *going on*?

Perky and her collaborators thought they grasped the central implication of the work, and here is how she summed it up: “We find, in brief, that a visual perception of a distinctly supraliminal value may, and under our conditions does, pass—even with specially trained observers—for an image of imagination.”¹⁰ In other words, the mind seems to be relatively easily tricked into confusing an actual sensory perception with an act of pure imagination. We seem to be able to believe we are dreaming things that are, in fact, right in front of us. The implications are not small. We tend to rely on the notion that our senses tell us about things that are going on out there in the world and that (when we are not on drugs or experiencing major delusions) we can distinguish mental images from physical objects. The Perky Effect strongly suggests that we should be cautious about getting overconfident concerning these judgments.¹¹

7. Perky, “An Experimental Study of Imagination,” 432.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 433.

11. Over the years, there have been a number of efforts to tweak, and even to explicitly displace, this most obvious interpretation of the Perky experiments. The most significant of these have been attempts to show that what is *really* going on here is that, when you ask people to do a given mental task, they get measurably less good at various other conceptual/perceptual work. In particular, there seems to be good evidence that, if you ask people to *imagine* something, their actual ability to see stuff out there with their eyes is compromised. For a while, quite a few experimental psychologists suspected that something like this was what was “really” going on in the Perky experiments—in other words, that the test subjects were really “not seeing” the projected images, even though these were

Perhaps this strikes you as a little far-fetched? After all, you are pretty sure you can tell the difference between what you imagine and what you see. Fair enough. But you may feel a chink in the armor of your certainty if you consider a more “real world” Perky scenario. In the late 1960s, a young professor of psychology at the City College of New York, Sydney Joelson Segal, repeatedly restaged different versions of the Perky Effect and used new technologies and data-processing techniques to tease out its qualities. She began her 1970 essay “Imagery and Reality: Can They Be Distinguished?” with a wonderfully relatable Perky-parable:

A middle-aged man is walking down the street. Suddenly, quite unexpectedly, he thinks of his old friend Michael Flanagan, pictures his ruddy face and sandy hair. His thoughts wander a bit, and then he looks ahead, and sees—could it be? why surely it is! yes, indeed, there is Michael Flanagan himself, only with his sandy hair gone gray and his ruddy face a bit drawn. After a surprised greeting, for he had thought Michael was half a continent away, he remarks, “how strange, I was just thinking of you.” In reconstructing this interesting coincidence, it may be assumed that the man, looking casually through the crowd of hurrying people two blocks away, picked up some sensory input from a face in the crowd which reminded him of Michael Flanagan; It was, indeed, the very features of Flanagan himself. But as his automatic evaluation of the contextual probabilities led him to conclude that it was not Michael Flanagan, the sensory input simply merged with his memories and led him to imagine the face of his old friend. When the stimulus input became stronger, that is when Michael Flanagan stood before him, he was able to make a correct judgment, despite the improbability.¹²

This leaves us with, I think, a somewhat disorienting question: How much of life works this way? Another question then follows and is directly relevant to the readers of *History and Theory*: What are the implications for thinking about the activity of historical inquiry?

being shown at a brightness that fell in a zone of luminosity that would normally be clearly visible to the eye. But the Perky situation wasn't “normal,” because the subjects were focused on *trying to imagine an object*—so their physical vision was “inhibited” by this imaginative work. Various cleverly designed follow-up experiments have pretty much established that something like this does occur and that it probably accounts for some of what is going on with Perky Effects. But there is very definitely something else going on, too, something that cannot be explained away by this kind of “interference” between looking and imagining. For a concise (if not, perhaps, perfectly unbiased) overview of the state of the debate, see Nigel J. T. Thomas's supplement to the “Mental Imagery” entry: “The Perky Experiment,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archIves/sum2020/entries/mental-imagery/perky-experiment.html>.

12. S. J. Segal, “Imagery and Reality: Can They Be Distinguished?,” in *Origin and Mechanisms of Hallucinations*, ed. Wolfram Keup (Boston: Springer, 1970), 103–4. It is important to note that Segal was working on military contracts in this time, and her Perky work operated very much in the context of the Cold War sciences of mind and behavior (she had worked with Milgram; she used Ganzfeld “hoods” in her tests; and I believe there was also psychotropic drug work as well). Fascinatingly, she actually alleged that Perky herself got better “Perky Effects” *because it was 1909* (when people were, as Segal saw it, more “generally credible”)—this “internal” historicizing of the psychological subject (“internal” to science, that is; and *activated as part of scientific explanation of phenomena*) is an extraordinary inflection point in the self-conscious historicism of the human sciences in the twentieth century.

II

There is a lot to say about the Perky experiments. Any real effort to come to terms with them requires a dive into the world of experimental psychology on the watershed of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. This is largely a story about the translation of a set of laboratory techniques and apparatuses from Germany (the nineteenth-century hotbed of this research) to the United States. But in the case of Perky's work, it is more narrowly a story about one very particular American laboratory: Cornell, which, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, had become the leading place in the country to do research on the mind. This was on account of one man, the English-born psychologist Edward Bradford Titchener (1867–1927), who had apprenticed himself to the leading German scientist of perception in the late nineteenth century, Wilhelm Wundt, before coming to the United States and building a dominant graduate program in experimental psychology amid the gorges of Ithaca.

Titchener's methods—substantially acquired during his time in Germany, but developed into an independent theory of mind across his prominent career in the United States—are now treated as something of a relic in the history of the mind sciences. Titchener believed deeply in what he called “introspection” as a way of exploring psychological processes. In one sense, this means roughly what it sounds like: you sit there and think about what is going on in your head (the very approach from which I, somewhat unusually, launched this article). As a way of understanding thinking, it has an undeniable appeal. But one might call it a “first order” appeal—in that further thinking might well persuade you that it is pretty hard to use thinking to think about thinking. Or anyway, scientific consensus in the years after Titchener's death drifted firmly against introspection, which was denounced as insufficiently “objective” and possibly not scientific at all. What people said about what was happening in their minds was mostly relegated to the category of “folk” psychology—or pawned off on therapists to deal with.¹³ The dominant school of experimental psychology across the broad belly of the twentieth century was “behaviorist,” which denominated a research program explicitly indifferent to any substantive engagement with “what was going on in the head” of a psychological subject (human or animal). Consensus was that it's just too hard to say anything about that. Simply focusing on inputs and outputs instead—in effect, “black boxing” the whole problem of mind-as-such—proved a hugely powerful paradigm for the sciences of cognition and behavior for some forty years or more.

13. To be fair, there is hardly a more contentious issue in the history of psychology. For a somewhat dated, but still compelling, review of the problem, see William Lyons, *The Disappearance of Introspection* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986). I have been much struck in recent years by the work of Russell T. Hurlburt, a professor of psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who has done a great deal to rehabilitate a version of introspection through what he calls “Descriptive Experience Sampling.” See Russell T. Hurlburt and Eric Schwitzgebel, *Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

But Titchener, who trained more than fifty doctoral students during his tenure at Cornell (including, notably, nearly two dozen women), did very much believe in introspection. And Perky, who was one of his doctoral students, designed experiments reflecting that commitment. She was asking her subjects *what they saw* in their minds, and she and her collaborators were recording *what those subjects said*. This was central to the way Perky had been trained to get access to the workings of thought. Indeed, it was characteristic of Titchener's laboratory that introspection, being the primary tool for psychology, was treated as a highly specialized, even "technical," matter. Yes, you could ask "just anyone" about what was happening as they did their thinking—exactly as Perky herself did, for she started out with a couple of kids around the lab and then moved on to a cohort of undergraduates. Yes, you could learn things from this. But the *gold standard* of experimental work coming out of the Cornell laboratories in the early twentieth century was work in which the introspective labor had been done by *trained* "introspectionists"—which is to say, by persons (mostly graduate students or others in the "Psychology Seminary" run by Titchener) who had learned how to do high-quality, "scientific" rapportage on their own inner mental processes.

We can bracket, for now, how interesting this is. We can also put aside the fascinating issue of exactly what it looked like to become a bona fide scientific scrutinizer of your own mind. For our purposes, we need only observe that, for Perky, the *coup de grace* was that, in the final suite of her experiments, she used a set of five graduate students in the department, all of whom were experienced observationalists and cleared the bar of being "psychologically competent" (her term) *introspectors*.¹⁴

A full appreciation of the experiments requires better understanding of the immediate *context* (Titchener's own theories of attention; his ideas about mental imagery; the earlier experimental results in these areas on which Perky was drawing) and of the downstream *consequences* of her research (which have been real and significant). But for now, what I want to do is turn to something else, something basic, something, surprisingly, that proves very hard to sort out: Who was Mary Cheves West Perky?

Usually when a twentieth-century scientist is associated with a prominent, even "classic," experiment, we know a fair bit about the relevant biography. But in the case of Mary Cheves West Perky (sometimes "Cheves West Perky," sometimes "C. W. Perky," and, once upon a time, "Mary Cheves West"), that is not the case. Yes, she has a Wikipedia page, but at the time of my composition of this article, it was skeletal at best: it gave her dates of birth and death (both incorrect, as it happens); listed her as the creator of the eponymous experiment; and mentioned that she was involved with something called the "American Cooperative Movement" (which is true—a Wikipedia footnote to a GoogleBooks document establishes that she was, for a time, the associate secretary of the Cooperative League of America). There was not much on the life or the person. In fact, the discussion of the "Perky Effect" in her Wikipedia entry was, as of 2023, *three times* as long as

14. Cheves West Perky, "An Experimental Study of Imagination," *American Journal of Psychology* 21, no. 3 (1910), 433.

her actual biography. And while there is ample scholarship on the legacy of her experiment, and some of it is even pretty historical, there is basically nothing out there on her biography. Indeed, it is clear that a number of people have sniffed around on this question: in the course of my own searching, I stumbled on an obscure chat thread in a buried Reddit subdirectory in which somebody was trying to figure out if anyone had any idea who she was; the answer was no (though one reply gave advice on how to trace someone's ancestry).

Given this hole in what seems to be known, I thought I would take a moment to sketch out what I have been able to reconstruct—however provisional and fragmentary—of the life of the woman who gave us this remarkable set of insights into the relationship between our mind-life and the world. It turns out that aspects of her biography pair with her experimental problem in ways that are stimulating for metahistorical reflection—an issue to which I will return.

III

So, what *do* we know? Mary Cheves West seems to have been born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1875; her father was a lawyer and writer who had served as a low-ranking officer in the Confederate Army.¹⁵ Why his daughter elected to go north for her education is a mystery, but in 1902, Mary received a bachelor's degree from Teachers College at Columbia University.¹⁶ It was from there that she headed to Cornell, where she initially boarded with Mary Fowler, an unmarried young librarian who worked for the university in those years.¹⁷ An interval in Albany, teaching at the St. Agnes School, followed (1902–1904), and then she began her graduate training in Titchener's laboratory in the autumn of 1904. The work for which she is best known, "An Experimental Study of Imagination" (1910), was, in fact, a published version of her doctoral thesis, which she completed about eighteen months before. Indeed, she submitted the formal dissertation shortly before she got married: in February 1909, she wed Scott H. Perky, who had himself recently graduated from Cornell (with a BS in agriculture in 1907) and who was studying for his master's degree while working as a faculty research assistant on problems of the rural economy.

Scott Perky was not, however, any ordinary Cornell student. He was, in fact, the only surviving child of a very distinguished and on-again/off-again successful entrepreneur: Henry Drushel Perky. After more than a decade of boom-and-bust railroad projecting, Henry Perky had ultimately made his fortune as the inventor

15. She appears to have been the daughter of Charles Nephew West and Mary C. Cheves and to have been born on 16 February 1875.

16. See the 1906 *Catalogue of Officers and Graduates of Columbia University*, 534, https://books.google.com/books?id=c_kRAAAAYAAJ. She taught briefly at the Horace Mann School as she was completing her degree (1901–1902). See the academic appointments listing for the Phebe Anna Thorne School in the undergraduate courses edition of the 1931 *Bryn Mawr College Calendar*, 25, https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmc_calendars/44/, where Perky's short biography lists her previous teaching (and gives a date of 1901 for her degree, but this is countered by the official university publication).

17. She went on to play a notable role in the composition and management of the university's special collection of texts related to Dante and Boccaccio.

of “shredded wheat” and become a philanthropic projector of scientific farming, rural improvement, and food hygiene.¹⁸ Henry Perky passed away in 1906, mid-way through plans to build a new school for rational agriculture in Maryland. And young Scott Perky, himself an entrepreneur who would later make his own mark on commercial food in the United States (in addition to building a substantial library on the history of grains and agriculture), was, in 1909, a wealthy heir of twenty-nine years old, one well traveled and well connected.¹⁹

The young couple had converging enthusiasms in this period. Shortly after Mary finished her doctorate (and Scott his master’s degree), the young couple traveled to Europe, spending nearly two years there altogether, with at least one return back to the United States.²⁰ But by the early 1910s, they had resettled in New York City, where Scott was pursuing a doctorate at Columbia (which he would never complete) on “the mental effects of industrial occupations.”²¹ One gets the sense that his interest in the specifically mental life of labor was likely inspired by his engagement in his wife’s research.²² Both of the Perkys were involved in socialist clubs and activities while at Cornell, and this transitioned, across the period, into active work with several strains of forcefully progressive Gilded Age politics—especially the emergent cooperative movement.²³ It isn’t clear how the two of them came into the circle of Dr. James Peter Warbasse (the prominent surgeon and Spanish American War veteran who founded the Cooperative League of the United States in 1916), but Warbasse had been a driving force in New York

18. The most elaborate biography is Jim Holechek’s *Henry Perky: The Shredded Wheat King* (New York: iUniverse, 2007). It has a home-grown energy but certainly seems to exhaust the available archival sources.

19. He had been largely educated by tutors, as the family was itinerant, traveling in connection with projects ranging from experimental vehicles to the collecting of cereal varieties and cookery techniques. Scott spent a year in a boarding school in France and completed a round-the-world voyage in 1900.

20. They also spent time in the US South, including North Carolina, where Mary settled at the end of her life. For evidence of their time in North Carolina, see the letter from Scott Perky to Edward Bradford Titchener from Blowing Rock, NC, 31 May 1910, box 2, Edward Bradford Titchener Papers, 1887–1940, collection 14-23-545, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

21. “Twelfth List of Doctoral Dissertations in Political Economy in Progress in American Universities and Colleges,” *The American Economic Review*, 5 June 1915, 488.

22. The extent of this connection is reflected in the surviving correspondence in the Cornell archives: there are a pair of letters from Scott Perky to Titchener from 1909/1910. Both reflect a warm relationship and deal with money matters related to the printing of Mary Perky’s thesis (and an additional sum of \$500, which the Perkys conveyed to the laboratory for the support of equipment or scholarships—though the exact origin of the conveyance in obscure; there is a suggestion that it is a “repayment,” perhaps a reimbursement by Mary for a scholarship she did not complete, perhaps because of her marriage). What is clear is that, when Mary broke her arm in 1909, Scott picked up correspondence on behalf of the couple in a way that suggests that all of them were quite sociable. There is only one letter from Perky to Titchener that survives, and it is on the occasion of her embarking for Europe with her new husband.

23. They were involved, for instance, with the Intercollegiate Socialist Society. It is evident that this body was tightly linked to the emergent cooperative movement, since one reads reports on the ISS in the journal *The Co-operative Consumer*, for which Scott wrote and which became an organ of the Cooperative League. The ISS is discussed in Christine Stansell’s *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*, new ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), a book that helped me contextualize the story I am working to recover in these paragraphs.

socialist circles for years and was associated with the International Workers of the World, so a link through these channels seems likely.²⁴ Scott Perky served as the first Secretary of the Cooperative League, under Warbasse—and Mary was one of two assistant secretaries to the organization.

We hear Mary's forceful voice on questions of economic justice in her 1917 essay titled "Cooperation in the United States," which pressed explicitly on the connections between the cooperative movement and socialism—and acknowledged that many true anti-bourgeois radicals tended to dismiss the cooperative programs as merely palliative and therefore at odds with the ferment necessary for true change in the industrial-capitalist order.²⁵ Perky's position in the piece is that there are untapped resources and opportunities for socialist action in the emergent cooperative associations, which must do for consumers a version of what labor unions were achieving for workers. The piece shows a sophisticated command of left politics in the United States and beyond in the period, and it was reprinted as a ten-cent pamphlet in subsequent years in the same series with original works by Karl Marx.²⁶ Even as the couple was living in Columbia housing in Morningside Heights, and Scott was notionally working on his doctoral thesis, his research trips (including one to the coal mines of southern Illinois, where miners had formed an important cooperative) seemed to be more focused on the socialist political work of the Cooperative League.

Though I have not been able to turn up any private correspondence or manuscript material from the couple across these years, one catches a glimpse of their social life in the city from a squib in the back of the *Intercollegiate Socialist*, which dedicated a few pages of each issue to the activities of its "alumni." "Mr. and Mrs. Scott H. Perky" are listed among the "hosts" of gatherings of an informal New York City socialist roundtable that called itself "the Saturday Camaraderies." The group convened weekly discussions around topics such as "Revision or Application (of Marxian Theory)" and "State Socialism, Pro or Con?" One evening, hosted in the art studio of the young daughter-heiress of the banker Anson Phelps Stokes (he had passed away in 1913), featured a debate over a recent book on feminism and included as respondents *both* Rose Schneiderman (the Polish-born suffragist and trade unionist who had risen to national prominence in the wake of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire) *and* Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch (the founder of the Greenwich Village settlement house). The intellectual ferment of the community is palpable even from such fragments.

But between somewhere between 1917 and 1919, a significant transition occurred. While the nexus of socialist activism, trade-unionism, and labor reform

24. For relevant context, see Clarke A. Chambers, "The Cooperative League of the United States of America, 1916–1961: A Study of Social Theory and Social Action," *Agricultural History* 36, no. 2 (1962), 59–81, and, more recently, Nikola Balnave and Greg Patmore, "The Labour Movement and Co-operatives," *Labour History* 112 (May 2017), 7–24.

25. Cheves West Perky, "Cooperation in the United States," *Intercollegiate Socialist* 5, no. 4 (1917), 1–31.

26. She paired this with a coauthored essay published in 1918; see T. Singer, C. W. Perky, and E. R. Cheney, "The International Socialist, Labor and Co-operative Movements," in *American Labor Yearbook, 1917–1918*, ed. Alexander Trachtenberg (New York: Rand School of Social Science, 1918), 229–334.

seems to have been a notably shared milieu for Mary and Scott in the mid-1910s, and while a joint interest in the psychological dimensions of capitalist exploitation also appears to have bound the couple, on 2 June 1919, Scott H. Perky very definitely married Katherine C. de Selding, a middle daughter of one of the most successful real estate developers of Brooklyn—and the *other* assistant secretary of the Cooperative League across the period of Mary and Scott's involvement in the organization.²⁷ The new couple promptly decamped from New York City and took up residence, at least for a time, in a small hamlet off Lake Champlain: Keeseville, New York. One gets the sense that they were letting things blow over.

I cannot find any reference to the divorce, though it seems certain that a divorce occurred. And while there are quite a few biographies and obituaries of Scott Perky and his descendants (he and Katherine de Selding promptly had two children), there is no mention of this earlier marriage anywhere. The whole matter seems to have been ushered offstage in a hush.

From this point forward, Mary seems to have refashioned her identity. We no longer commonly see the name “Mary” in connection with her work or activities, much less “Mrs. Scott Perky.” Instead, she figures as “Dr. Cheves Perky” or, more frequently in later years, as “C. W. Perky” or “Cheves West Perky.” After 1919, her trajectory and activities can be reconstructed only from a handful of newspaper mentions and sundry other archival mentions. She evidently left the cooperative movement behind, and it appears that she never again published on socialism (at least under her own name). Moreover, I can find no evidence that she ever pursued further research work in psychology. What seems certain is that, on the occasion of the break, she relocated to Ohio, where she apparently taught for at least a semester (though in what field is not clear).²⁸ It was a transitional period, because, by May 1920, she had arrived in Columbia, Missouri, with an appointment as an assistant professor at the University of Missouri.²⁹

27. Joel de Selding had become a primary developer of Bay Ridge and the waterfront regions of outer Brooklyn. The marriage was reported in the *Brooklyn Blue Book and Long Island Society Register* for 1920. Katherine would have been 30; Scott, 39; Mary, 44. I have found no formal documentation of the divorce, assuming a divorce occurred. But it is notable that Scott Perky seems to have moved, sometime around 1918, to the elegant, newly erected Lennox Hill apartment building at 70 East 77th Street; this would have been a transit across the park, as the couple had previously resided at 106 Morningside Drive.

28. The Columbia, Missouri, newspaper that announced her arrival at the university there in May 1920 lists her as having recently taught at the “University of Ohio.” But this was Ohio State (in Columbus); it seems possible that the transition would have been assisted by the intervention of one of Perky's colleague-classmates from her days in the Cornell laboratories. Note that Titchener's doctoral students had fanned out across the United States and were staffing dozens of nascent psychology departments and university programs in related areas. Karl Dallenbach (a prominent figure in the field who worked on both attention and visual imagery) did his doctorate with Titchener in 1913 and had spent several years at Ohio State thereafter. Though he was no longer there by 1919, others associated with Titchener's “experimentalists” were—most significantly, as we will see below, Mabel Goudge, who was an assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State from 1918 to 1922, during which time she also completed an MD degree.

29. The translation seems likely to have been at least in part facilitated by John Sites Ankeney, who appears to have been the chair of the art program at Missouri. Ankeney was born in Ohio but spent much of his life in Missouri. His artistic formation, however, took place in New York and Paris. In New York, in the late nineteenth century, he studied with J. H. Twachtman at the Art Students League

Interestingly, however, she was to be an instructor not in psychology but in the “theory and practice of art.”³⁰

IV

And it is exactly this that opens up the most suggestive window onto the link between Perky’s biography and her vaunted series of experiments: Mary Cheves West, Mrs. Scott H. Perky, Dr. C. W. Perky was, above all—that is, she identified herself, above all, as—an *artist*.

Of this aspect of her formation, it is again possible to reconstruct, with some richness, her network of early teachers and later activities. What immediately becomes clear, as one begins to delve into these sources, is that Perky’s training in the visual arts *antedated* her studies in psychology—and continued robustly in the wake of her time in the laboratories of Cornell. Her first formal mentor was the distinguished painter Elliott Daingerfield, himself a southerner (from North Carolina, where he would return). Daingerfield had established himself as a fixture of the Beaux-Arts establishment of New York City by the early twentieth century. He studied and taught at the Art Students’ League in the 1880s, apprenticed himself to George Inness, spent several years in Europe, and returned to several prominent commissions in Manhattan, where he was elected a full member of the National Academy of Design in 1906. It seems likely that Perky would have encountered him in studio classes at the National Academy during the time that she was studying at Columbia. It is evident that, while she was in Ithaca, she continued her studio work, painting with the Norwegian artist Christian M. S. Midjo, who joined the faculty at Cornell shortly before the newly married Perky left the area. When she departed, it was for Europe, of course, where it seems she continued her studies (with, among others, the anglicized German artist Bernard Schumacher).

In a basic way, the whole of Perky’s life was dedicated to art and art-making. At the University of Missouri, she threw herself into the cultivation of the artistic life among the students and interested associates of the polite (white) culture of Columbia.³¹ She assisted the drama club in the staging of aspirational theater

and later claimed to have been a pupil of William Merritt Chase as well. From 1893 to 1895, he was in Paris at the well-regarded Académie Julian (working with Jules Lefebvre and Tony Robert-Fleury). He returned to the United States and taught art in schools in the early twentieth century and was in both New York and Boston for spells in the period between 1900 and 1920. He was a member of both the National Academy and the Salmagundi Club, and he allegedly worked with Denman Waldo Ross at Harvard. (Perky, too, apparently studied at Harvard in this period.) I have pieced together Ankeney’s biography from two main sources: his article (mostly on architecture) titled “A Century of Missouri Art,” *Missouri Historical Review* 16, no. 4 (1922), 481–501, and an article titled “Extensive Local Art Colony Is Headed by Prof. J. S. Ankeny,” *Columbia Evening Missourian*, 17 December 1921, 3, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89066316/1921-12-17/ed-1/seq-3/>.

30. The appointment is noted in a front-page article on changes at the university (*Columbia Evening Missourian*, 31 May 1920, 1, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89066315/1920-05-31/ed-1/seq-1/>).

31. We are able to reconstruct the curriculum she built (with her colleagues) for students of art and design in the period thanks to a listing in the General Catalog of the University of Missouri for 1921–1922, where it is reported that there was a weekly non-credit “sketch club” on Tuesday evenings (7:00–9:00 p.m.) and a set of key classes: “Introduction to Art,” “Representation” (which

(working on set design, it appears), led discussions with students interested in art in connection with a “vocational conference” on working women, presented on “modern American poetry” at an evening salon of the American Association of University Women, and was a fixture of the Daubers’ Club of local painters, working to launch a circle of amateurs committed to learning and practicing the etching as an art form.³² Her politics remained progressive, as best as can be discerned, even within a milieu in which the newspaper of Columbia weekly reported on not only who went to which Sunday tea but also (literally) what kind of flowers constituted the primary decor of each occasion. Within what must have been, then, for Perky (given her radical period in New York City), a somewhat stifling environment, she agitated for the rights of women and even introduced a shiver of outrage into the polite company: she was surely behind the Daubers’ Club Halloween party that was themed “*Les Apaches de Paris*,” a reference to the romantic-but-genuinely-terrifying criminal subculture of Paris at the turn of the century—violent thugs who wore the moniker of the Native Americans of the Plains (on account of overlapping legends of godless brutality). Full costumes were expected.³³ Along the way, there were regular classes, showings, and exhibitions of work by students, Perky, and other teachers.³⁴

Despite all this activity, something of this world ultimately did not hold Perky. By 1923, she was back in New York, and it seems she never returned to her post at the University of Missouri. Her trajectory over the next twenty years (it appears she passed away in the 1940s) took her from New York to Philadelphia (in 1925), where, until 1931, she taught “painting, drawing, modeling, and craft” at the “model school” associated with Bryn Mawr.³⁵ At that point, she transi-

she cotaught), “Theory of Design,” “Pictorial Composition,” and “Problems of Form.” There was also an advanced class titled “Psychological Principles of Art,” which one imagines she played a role in developing. See “Statement of Courses,” in *Eightieth Report of the Curators of the Governor of the State, 1921–1922*, 155–56, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112089379892>.

32. The *Columbia Evening Missourian* ran a social column in these years that reported regularly on cultural events, “teas,” and the like. Perky’s doings are relatively easy to trace across these short news items, as she seems to have been a fixture of the community. See, for example, the issues for 10 December 1920 (on work with the Dramatic Club); 7 March 1921 (for discussion on women’s vocations); 11 January 1922 (for AAUW evening); and 18 January 1922 (for Daubers’ Club and etching).

33. On organizing for women’s rights, see Perky’s role in connection with the Women’s Self Government Association (*Columbia Evening Missourian*, 28 March 1922, 8, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89066316/1922-03-28/ed-1/seq-8/>). On the Halloween party, see the 28 October 1922 issue of the *Columbia Evening Missourian* (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89066316/1922-10-28/ed-1/seq-3/>). It is perhaps interesting to note that Perky was an honorary member of the Cosmopolitan Club, which gathered foreign students and American students of a worldly disposition. It was chaired by Simon C. Tu, a Chinese student on a Chinese government scholarship who would decamp for Harvard in the early 1920s.

34. She did give a talk on “some recent hypotheses in clinical psychology” to the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1922, suggesting that her interest in psychology had not entirely passed—though suggesting that she had moved to an interest in psychoanalytic approaches. There is further evidence for this shift in what seems to have been her friendship, in these years, with Gregory Stragnell, a neuropsychiatrist. Stragnell acquired his MD at Columbia in 1913, and it seems that they must have met at that time. He went on to have a distinguished career as an editor of the *Medical Record* and member of the American Psychoanalytic Association. Later in his life, he was closely associated with several pharmaceutical companies.

35. Apparently, in 1928, she again took at least one graduate course in “psychology and education.”

tioned to the new Education Division of what was then called the “Pennsylvania Museum of Art” (now the Philadelphia Museum of Art), where she ran children’s programs and staffed an experimental teaching and learning space for students within the museum itself.³⁶ It appears she was also involved in a Works Progress Administration art project at the museum in the Depression years. She retired from her position in Philadelphia in 1937, at the age of 62, and, for a time, moved back to New York, where she was again active in the Art Students League, showing oil paintings in the Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in 1941.³⁷ By 1943, she had decamped one last time for the South and settled for her final years in a small house on Rosemary Street in Chapel Hill, North Carolina—where she continued to give drawing lessons and hold art classes.³⁸

At present, this seems to be most—if not quite all—of what can be reconstructed of the biographical arc of the woman who gave us the experiments that wear her (married) name. And what is left to us is some reflection on the intersection of Perky’s art-life and her brief (if enduring) work in sustained experimental psychology.

V

But before I turn to reflection on this art-science nexus, I would like to briefly mention an additional element of Perky’s life—a kind of small, archival *meteor* that streaks like a shooting star through the source material. By this, I mean that it is bright, startling, and nearly instantaneous. Like a shooting star, it is also over before one really has a chance to “see” it. It is, in this sense, a *glimpse*. Its “historical” significance is hard to assess. Everything depends, I suppose, on how one thinks of “history.” Such a fleeting historical luminosity may be best understood as a species of archival *disclosure* (which is to say, an instance of that dialectical sense of *something not seen* that has the effect of revealing that there is “something else out there”)—a disclosure that points to the larger problem of *how what we are imagining hovers at the threshold of perception*; indeed, that perception itself turns out to be a train wreck of what we see and what we dream.³⁹

36. See her “Children in the Museum,” *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 27, no. 143 (1931), 11–14. There, one can find her touching lightly on questions of psychology and development in relation to the arts: “It is our object . . . to place in their hands [the hands of the children] the tools of expression of their own ideas. Perception will be quickened and deepened by expression. Vision may be clarified and developed rapidly by drawing from memory, and by increasing and organizing the mass of associated ideas” (ibid., 11). See also the discussion of her work in the same issue in an essay by the director of the education department, Rossiter Howard, “Interpreting the Museum,” *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 27, no. 143 (1931), 2–7. There are apparently a few archival sources related to this appointment in the Fiske Kimball Records at the Archives of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; I have not consulted them.

37. These were a pair of paintings, one entitled *Portrait, Girl* and a still life. To my knowledge, neither has surfaced. For the reference, see Clark S. Marlor, *The Society of Independent Artists: The Exhibition Record, 1917–1944* (Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press, 1984).

38. An advertisement published on 19 November 1943 in the *Chapel Hill Weekly* under the banner “Classes in Art for Children and Adults” offers a variety of options for media and times, taught by “Cheves West Perky (Ph.D. Cornell) . . . Progressive methods.”

39. My invocation of the duplex/antinomic nature of such archival disclosures (they “manifest” what is “hidden”) picks up on the framing of a central historiographical problem that has received

This, of course, is the Perky Effect. And we might do well to ask ourselves whether certain vexing aspects of the philosophy of history could perhaps sit productively with Perky phenomena for a time. Historians, it is tempting to suggest, have long been enormously concerned about historical “hallucinations”—that is, thinking things are “out there” in the past that *aren't* (because they are, in fact, in our heads). Historians work hard to root out such fantasies and misprisions, and rightly so. But what is fascinating about the Perky experiments, of course, is that they reveal the obverse problem: sometimes what we think we are imagining *is actually in the world*. I would argue, I think, that our relationship with the past often works in much the same way: we sit still and imagine, with our eyes wide open; and our reveries, under certain exquisite conditions of meditation (and mediation), are the *actual stuff of history*. Key aspects of “what was” come most sharply, deeply, and definitively into view *only when we dream*. This is how what is out there becomes what is *in here*—to our abiding surprise.

This may be wrong, of course. And it may be too gnomic to assess, too. But I am interested in this notion of what we might call “Perky historiography.” Is it possible to experiment with this kind of Perky Effect? Here, let's try.

On 23 September 1922, the (slightly nosy?) *Columbia Evening Missourian* ran a front-page, topline news story under the headline: “Baby Adopted by Dr. Cheves Perky Arrives Safely from Nova Scotia.” Perky herself is not quoted in the piece, which focuses on the story of the university junior in the art program, “Miss Orin Johnson,” who has been “studying art in New York City” and was “sent to Halifax by Doctor Perky to get the child.”⁴⁰ It was a three-day journey: train from Halifax to Montreal; train from Montreal to New York City; train from Montreal to Saint Louis; river steamer from Saint Louis to the port town of McBaine, on the Missouri River, a taxi ride away from Columbia. The paper reported that the fifteen-month-old boy, with red hair and grey eyes, had raised a ruckus on each leg of the voyage, precipitating a number of vexed encounters with fellow passengers (according to Johnson, who claimed she had come to be known as “the Madonna of the Pullman” en route). The child was reported as having “a will of his own.” On the same day, in the classified section of the same paper, Perky herself (or someone helping her) placed an advertisement—seeking, it seems, a second-hand crib (Figure 1).⁴¹

close attention from scholars committed to deconstructive approaches. For the best discussion, see Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), esp. ch. 1 and ch. 5. In what follows, I try to read the Perky Effect as a contribution to the (absolutely necessary, in my view) project of offering, within the framework of disciplinary historical inquiry, what Kleinberg calls “a critique of our conventional assumptions about space and time as the coordinates of identity” (ibid., 53). He sees deconstruction as a powerful method to this end, and I am open to efforts in that key. However, I think an exploration of “Perky historiography” suggests alternative routes to this end.

40. “Baby Adopted by Dr. Cheves Perky Arrives Safely from Nova Scotia,” *Columbia Evening Missourian*, 23 September 1922, 1, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89066316/1922-09-23/ed-1/seq-1/>. The article explains that the child's father was a Canadian soldier injured in the war. There is no mention of his mother.

41. “Miscellaneous,” *Columbia Evening Missourian*, 23 September 1922, 5, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89066316/1922-09-23/ed-1/seq-5/>.

call 761 red and ask for Mrs. Baker. C6tf	Liberal reward for information concerning whereabouts of Ford rear wheels removed from Stewart Road. Coleman's Laundry. C20-26
FOR RENT —Garage. Phone 744 Red. F19-1f	MISCELLANEOUS
FOR RENT —To man student, one-half room with upperclassman. Phone 744 Red. F19-1f	crib. C. W. Perky, 1915-red. 23-24 WANTED —A second hand baby
FOR RENT —Large, well furnished rooms for couples or men; close in. 201 College, Phone 1880-White. H.19-1f.	WANTED —Girl room mate, ½ block from University. Phone 1010 White after 6:30 P. M. B-2t
FOR RENT —Light housekeeping rooms. Call 761 red and call for Mrs. Baker. C6tf	WANTED —A first-class milk cow for cash or will take in exchange for beef cow and calf. Sipes, 514 Ann, phone 1512 Green. S19-1f
ROOMS FOR RENT —Two rooms in	

Figure 1. An archival moment of some strangeness. From “Miscellaneous,” *Columbia Evening Missourian*, 23 September 1922, 5,
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89066316/1922-09-23/ed-1/seq-5/>.

Now it is time to ask what can be “done,” historically, with this little irruption from the world of digitized source-matter—and not just this slightly haunting ad, to which I will return, but the baby too. What can be “done” with this whole matter?

Well, on its face, not all that much. It is, I suppose, merely “human interest.” Dr. Perky wanted a baby, it seems. And she “got” one.

However, perhaps it *is* possible to say a bit more. For one thing, the article on the arrival of the child specifies that the boy was found for her by “an artist friend” named Dr. Mabel Goudge. This is not quite right, though. Mabel Ensworth Goudge received her doctorate in Titchener’s laboratory in 1914 for a study of certain somatic illusions, and she went on to get an MD degree as well. If she was an “artist,” I have not been able to turn up any evidence of this work. She was, however, a practicing doctor in private practice in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with a teaching appointment at Duke. It isn’t clear to me exactly what bound her to Nova Scotia, but there can be no doubt that she kept a house there (in Wolfville) and had ties to Dalhousie University.⁴² What we can discern, in all of this, is that Goudge was almost certainly one of Perky’s closest, and likely life-long, friends: when Perky left New York in the wake of her separation from her husband, she went to Ohio, where Goudge was then teaching. And at the end of her life, Perky retired to North Carolina—and to Chapel Hill, where Goudge then resided.

Other biographical elements fall into place, perhaps. It is difficult not to surmise that something about the shift to single motherhood informed Perky’s

42. Goudge is discussed in Robert W. Proctor and Rand Evans, “E. B. Titchener, Women Psychologists, and the Experimentalists,” *American Journal of Psychology* 127, no. 4 (2014), 501–26. Perky, too, gets a brief mention here, in an article that painfully unfolds the conundrum of Titchener’s support of female graduate training in psychology, even as he denied women the chance to participate in the tighter circle of his protégés. Dalhousie continues to award the Mabel E. Goudge Prize for female medical students.

(otherwise seemingly hasty and unexplained) departure from Columbia, Missouri, early in 1923. Did she feel she had more of a “community” in New York City? Presumably. What community? Well, we next find her as an assistant to the established portrait painter Henry R. Rittenberg, working from his space in the very stately Gainsborough Building at 222 West 59th Street—a legendary set of artists’ studios with giant, north-facing windows giving on to Central Park South.⁴³ She had studied with Rittenberg two summers before, and with the populist “Ashcan” painter George Luks, then at the height of his powers. It seems, then, that she returned to the milieu of bourgeois-bohemian New York, now cresting into the Gatsby-era vitality of the 1920s—and thus to a cosmopolitan environment that the heartland could not provide.

But was the child even with her?

Throughout my research on this material, I became increasingly preoccupied with a sense of foreboding around Perky’s son. It was as if the red-haired boy who arrived in Columbia, Missouri, on 22 September 1922 had simply disappeared from the historical record. I knew, or thought I knew, his name: Perky wrote that she had christened him “Gregory Strangell,” honoring, in doing so, a man that she evidently thought of as a friend: Dr. Gregory Strangell, by then already a prominent neuropsychiatrist whose interest in Freud and work with psycho-sexual issues had attracted notice.⁴⁴ But if her son actually had that name, it was as if he had vanished from the planet. I sifted in vain through a cosmos of searchable records. Had the boy died?

Projection? Something poetic and strange lurked in that advertisement for the crib, which had been laid out, inadvertently we must suppose, as a kind of modernist couplet:

crib. C. W. Perky, 1915-red. 23–24
WANTED—A second hand baby

A second-hand baby? No, not quite. But then again, not entirely not, either. And this was part of troubling miasma that descended around the problem. Where was the child? Why was the historical record as empty as a second-hand crib? Why was I seeing, so clearly, in my mind’s eye, *loss*? Surely this was my own affair, my own reverie of sorrow, my own sense of what can happen.

But then, later, an enterprising colleague solved the mystery, sending me an archival ledger for passenger landings in London in 1927. One “Gregory Perky,” age 6, had disembarked from the *SS Minnekahda* on 27 September, bound for the

43. For Perky’s work with Rittenberg, see the November 1923 advertisement in *International Studio*, which appears under the classified section titled “Leading American Art Schools.”

44. See note 34 above. Dr. Gregory Strangell had his own children, but none of them was named “Gregory.” We must suppose it to be pure coincidence that, on 6 September 1922, just a few weeks before little “Gregory Stragnell” (no relation, apparently) arrived in Columbia, Strangell published an article in *The New York Medical Journal and Medical Record* (subsequently reviewed in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*) titled “Psychopathological Disturbances from the Avoidance of Parental Responsibility.”

Beacon Hill School in Petersfield, the new experimental-progressive educational project of Bertrand and Dora Russell.⁴⁵

So, what I had projected had been, if you like, both true and false: “Gregory Strangell” had been erased. *That* child, or the child of that name, did not survive. A “Gregory Perky,” it seems, did, though, in the late 1920s, anyway, his mother had an empty crib of sorts. Who knows what actually happened? What, exactly, is the line between seeing things that are not there and thinking that you are imagining things that actually happened? When does archival hallucination become the Perky Effects of the historiographical imagination?

VI

Let’s circle back, now, and ask how all of this biography may be set in relation to the Perky experiments themselves, which is to say, let’s give some thought to the resonances between Perky’s art-life (her formation in the making of images, her “eye” as a painter) and her work as an experimentalist working the problem of perception in the trading zone that links imagination and vision.

What surfaces in this inquiry is Perky’s heretofore obscured relationship to *the central problem of the visual arts across the watershed of the early twentieth century*: the problem of mental “imagery” as against the “world of the eye.” This was the deep challenge to traditional painting posed by the Symbolists and the Impressionists alike, both of whom worked the question of the “locus” of what is seen and did so by means of reciprocating commitments to dream-scenes and pure opticality.

But we are not dependent on such sweepingly general observations when we examine the place of the visual arts in Perky’s research. We can bring the problematic right up close to her specific training and milieu. Her own first teacher, Elliott Daingerfield, published extensively on this very issue. In an essay entitled “Nature vs. Art,” which was published in *Scribner’s* in 1911, Daingerfield drilled in again and again on the importance of a rethinking of the balance of external perception and internal imagination. Above all, the eyes were to be mistrusted, and the inner sense privileged. Citing his own teacher, George Inness, Daingerfield wrote, “I fully understand what Mr. Inness meant when he said to a painter who declared he had seen a thing in such and such a way—‘The eyes are a pair of liars.’”⁴⁶ Daingerfield’s critique of the “traditionalist” painters of his moment was that they remained excessively bound to the world of mere appearance: “If reproduction of surface fact be the ultimate of the painter’s mission, then he is of all men the most petty and miserable,” he wrote.⁴⁷ But at the same time, it was not as if one could paint without a model—or paint without closely regarding the world. The issue, for Daingerfield, was to see *through* and *by* the imagination. He again quotes Inness, “I see my compositions in my own soul,” in the course of an

45. See Deborah Gorham, “Dora and Bertrand Russell and the Beacon Hill School,” *RUSSELL: The Journal of Bertrand Russell Studies*, n.s., 25 (2005), 39–76.

46. Elliott Daingerfield, “Nature vs. Art,” *Scribner’s* 49 (January–June 1911), 256.

47. *Ibid.*, 254.

argument that the “seeing” of the painter is precisely charged with the stuff of the spirit: “I cannot find myself interested in what any man sees with his eyes alone, my own are equally good as machines, provided time and the oculist have been kind; it is what he sees with his gifts, with his understanding, with his knowledge, what he interprets that interests me, and lifts the artist above the ordinary observer.”⁴⁸ The secret, as Daingerfield would have it, was “to see beneath the fact to that thing . . . called ‘the soul of a fact.’”⁴⁹

Read against this problematic, the Perky experiments open up. While they are surely engaged in the period debates in psychology about the imagination, they represent a distinctive effort to elide a simple distinction between “phantasy” and vision, an elision that had special status in the world of the painters with whom Perky trained. For them, to “see in the mind” was to *see the world*, and vice versa, as Daingerfield’s essay argues at length. Perky’s experiments revealed an empirical basis for precisely this sensibility.

Indeed, in the context of a thickened biographical appreciation of Perky’s training as an artist, her detailed description of the original experimental scenario is legible in a new way. The meticulous concern with the projective color gels, with the even hue of the ground-glass window, with the tulle dressing on the silhouettes, with the choreography of the slow rock and wobble of the ghost images as they played up on the threshold of perception—all of this suddenly feels like an artist seeking to paint with light upon the mind—*directly*; all of this suddenly feels like an effort to “stage” a moving picture of what happens *within the imagination itself*. Yes, this needs to be understood in relation to period preoccupations with cinema and the older phantasmagoria of the magic lantern show. But what is perhaps most tempting is to draw a link to the work of Thomas Wilfred, Perky’s contemporary, who threaded the same communities in New York in the 1910s and 1920s—and whose “lumia” light-music projections (on frosted glass screens) have recently been elevated to canonical status in the history of twentieth-century visual art.⁵⁰ At present, I can draw no direct biographical link. But the formal consonances and historical conjunction merit consideration. Whatever the ultimate nature of the connection (direct, indirect, visible, imagined), we will do well, I think, to reconsider Perky and to place her near the origin of a very different genealogy than that where history has slotted her: yes, she is a remarkable early experimental psychologist; but she is also a pioneer in the ultra-modernist art of *painting directly with light*.

One sees moments of exactly this in the comments she records from her experimental subjects (many of whom, one suddenly notices, were almost certainly students of the visual arts—friends she must have known from her

48. *Ibid.*, 255–56.

49. *Ibid.*, 256.

50. Keely Orgeman, ed., *Lumia: Thomas Wilfred and the Art of Light* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

classwork with Christian Midjo and others).⁵¹ So, says one, who watches the colored shadows play in her mind (as they are in fact upon the wall): “I can spread it [the color] over if I want to.”⁵² Someone is painting with light. But who?

VII

Perky painted—with light, and with paint as well. Despite much searching, I can find essentially nothing—*almost* nothing—of all that work she did with a brush on canvas. It surprises me, much as the tenuousness of her biographical record surprises me. But as in that case, so, too, in the case of her painterly *oeuvre*, we must make do with a few sketchy fragments. Three studies, in oil on paperboard, survive.⁵³ All are in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, and each was executed in 1937. At first blush, knowing what we now know, there is a temptation, I think, to experience them as slightly uncanny—in the way they seem to float, these objects, before an even screen, as if hallucinations in a Ganzfeld experiment (Figures 2A–C).

But context is everything. These are images from the vast Federal Art Project known as the “Index of American Design.” There are nearly 18,000 of them, done by hundreds of artists across the period from 1937 to 1942. While the objects they depict are all unique (these almost certainly hail from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Perky was working when she painted them), the images themselves, all the thousands of them, are stylistically almost perfectly homogenous, which is to say: they all basically look just like this.

So, look at them again. I do not think they tell us very much about the way Dr. C. W. Perky painted. Nor, I think, given their provenance and conditions of production, do they offer us much insight into her thoughts on the psychology of perception.⁵⁴

But they do leave us with an opportunity. Let’s take a moment to *look at them* and to imagine *what Perky might have seen when she did the same thing*. Mary

51. How else to explain the peculiar comment (by one of them) that “I can get blue better, because I have been working with a blue square lately” (quoted in Perky, “An Experimental Study of Imagination,” 432).

52. Quoted in Perky, “An Experimental Study of Imagination,” 432. (The bracketed text appears in brackets in the original.) Note: this raises the larger issue of “colored shadows,” themselves a classic problem in the visual arts. I suspect that they are a larger part of what Perky is exploring in the experiments than has ever been recognized. For instance, see another cited comment: “It seems strange; because you see so many colors, and know that they are in your mind; and yet they look like shadows” (quoted in Perky, “An Experimental Study of Imagination,” 432).

53. These are, in the order given, *Pitcher*, 1937, oil paint on paperboard, 51.3 × 38.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.19292.html>; *Pennsylvania German Pie Dish*, c. 1937, oil paint on paperboard, 51.5 × 38.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.25090.html>; and *Jar*, c. 1937, oil paint on paperboard, 51.2 × 38.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.21463.html>.

54. I am touched by the observation, made by one of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript, that the “Index of American Design” was, of course, itself a project of historical “recovery” (in that it endeavored to create and preserve a visual repository of the design legacies of the United States). In this sense, we are indeed seeing an artifact of Perky’s own effort to look at, and document, the past.



Figure 2. What Perky saw (in her mind's eye). These works by Perky are, respectively, (A) *Pitcher*, 1937, oil paint on paperboard, 51.3 × 38.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.19292.html>; (B) *Pennsylvania German Pie Dish*, c. 1937, oil paint on paperboard, 51.5 × 38.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.25090.html>; and (C) *Jar*, c. 1937, oil paint on paperboard, 51.2 × 38.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.21463.html>. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Cheves West Perky knew that what we see in our minds may, sometimes, actually be in the world.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to historicize the Perky experiments of the early twentieth century and, in doing so, to contextualize them while thickening our appreciation for the crossing worlds out of which they came. Not only did they draw on the distinctively “introspective” program of experimental psychology as it was practiced at Cornell under Titchener; they also manifested a very particular preoccupation with artistic “vision” at the turn of the century. The figure who staged a remarkably generative encounter between these two programs was herself, as

we have seen, an artist-psychologist whose imaginative research centered, beguilingly, on the shimmering threshold of visibility. But that is not all. As these pages have attempted to show, Mary Cheves West Perky did not merely *study* the threshold of visibility; she ultimately came to *live there*: in the archival half-light, squinting, we found ourselves doing a Perky experiment on Perky herself, trying, through a gauzy scrim of evidentiary fragments, to imagine her, unsure now and again of whether what came up on the screen (the screen at which I am looking now, the screen on which I have been doing both my searching and my typing) was a wisp of projective fantasy or a proper bit of her actual life swimming into view.

In one sense, of course, this is the universal condition of the historian, who forever strains to find and evaluate sources and who inevitably senses the inadequacy of the available documentation to the intricate complexity of all that was. But it is also the case that we have fewer and more tattered sources for some of those who have passed and richer ones for others—in ways that proceed from, mirror, and ultimately perpetuate a host of injustices. In Perky's case, this liminality is part of precisely such patterns: the archives of science in the first half of the twentieth century have not been kind to women (in general), and an assetless woman of that era whose plutocratic husband rather suddenly and silently created a new life for himself was, in effect, being asked to disappear. This looks to be exactly what happened.

Working these difficult problems of recovery and archival aporia in the painful context of American slavery, Saidiya Hartman's much-cited 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts" asks the absolutely urgent question for any historical thinker: "How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?"⁵⁵ Her distinctive contribution reflects powerfully on the complex threshold that links fact and fiction, and the resulting notion of "critical fabulation" has attracted a great deal of commentary.⁵⁶ While she insists that her "own writing is unable to exceed the limits of the sayable dictated by the archive," she does invoke the possibility of a kind of "history [that is] written with and against the archive"—and that achieves its critical power through a series of recombinations and refusals.⁵⁷ Does one want to call the result a "conjunction"? A work of pure "imagination"? It isn't clear that these are the right terms. But Hartman insists that we need techniques that can "jeopardize the status of the event, . . . displace the received or authorized account, and . . . imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done."⁵⁸

Above all, an ethical imperative suffuses this inquiry and gives dignity and grace to project; there is a clear sense that facile "recovery" is no less a failure than a willingness to turn away from the impossible task. Indeed, she concludes her meditation with an invocation of Slavoj Žižek's dialectic of "enthusiastic resignation," whereby it is precisely the "experience" of the impossibility of representation that "incites enthusiasm" for the ongoing representational program.⁵⁹

55. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008), 3.

56. *Ibid.*, 11.

57. *Ibid.*, 12.

58. *Ibid.*, 11.

59. *Ibid.*, 14n45.

History that permits its sense of what it knows to glow from within by the warm light of active unknowing will always be better history, because what we do not know—what we cannot know—will always exceed the rest.

We fail in so many ways in the work of history. But what is perhaps most promising about the Perky experiments is that they remind us of the rich ways that our imaginings are *always already* made up of the stuff of the real world. Is the implication that we should simply “trust our intuitions”? Because, say, like the stopped clock of the adage, they, too, will now and again speak the truth? No, not exactly. But we would do well to explore the ways that systematic, iterative, and archival imagining can, in fact, turn out to be a powerful way of “doing” history, a powerful way of nurturing and effecting a deeper and more faithful historical consciousness; one learns things about the actual past this way.⁶⁰

To these ends, we need to be careful with the work of our imagination. Writing at the end of his life, Italo Calvino expressed a fear that the shifting media ecology of late modernity was placing the actual life of the imagination in danger. He feared the loss of what he called “a basic human faculty: the power of . . . *thinking* in terms of images.”⁶¹ He called out for a new kind of teaching and learning that he could only dimly begin to envision, “some possible pedagogy of the imagination that would accustom us to control our own inner vision without suffocating it or letting it fall, on the other hand, in to confused, ephemeral daydreams, but would enable the images to crystallize into well-defined, memorable, and self-sufficient form.”⁶²

Did he know about the Perky Effect? I don’t know. But he seems to be sketching the threshold across which her subjects moved. A Perky historiography must begin with an ethically serious program of imaginative freedom, since one needs to be careful with the things one thinks one is dreaming. Ralph Waldo Emerson may have had something like this in mind in his gnomic apothegm from his essay “Experience”: “Let us be poised, and wise, and our own, today. Let us treat men and women well: treat them as if they were real: *perhaps they are*.”⁶³ I imagine Perky would have agreed.

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60. The work of the “conjectural historiographic collective” known as ESTAR(SER) can be understood as precisely such a project. The point of departure is D. Graham Burnett, Catherine L. Hansen, and Justin E. H. Smith, *In Search of the Third Bird* (London: Strange Attractor, 2021). See also D. Graham Burnett, Jeff Dolven, Catherine L. Hansen, and Justin E. H. Smith, “Metafiction and the Study of History: Makerly Knowledge in the Archive,” *Rethinking History* 27, no. 3 (2023), 537–57.

61. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 92.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 479 (emphasis added).