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Metafiction and the study of history: makerly knowledge in the archive

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ABSTRACT

Rapid changes in the context and condition of historical practice (technological, institutional, theoretical) invite practicing historians to entertain experimental techniques for engaging the past: for teaching students; for investigating archives; and for presenting the results of historical inquiry. The authors introduce a form of historically oriented research and writing that shows promise as a way of encouraging genuine immersion in the specificity and alterity of the past. This ‘metahistorical’ mode, which engages with historical fiction, but also with traditions of rigorous scholarly research, offers a powerful means by which to cultivate historical consciousness, and to promote imaginative historical practices.

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Let us begin with three pages drawn from what would appear to be a study of nineteenth-century American cultural/intellectual history (Figures 1 and 2 and 3).

This text manifestly presents as a work of historical scholarship. We readily identify a considerable number of the recognizable *indicia*: a topic and personages from the past; a contextually sensitive discussion of their doings; attention to primary source documents (and a paratextual preoccupation with the specification of their location and qualities); and perhaps more subtly, a style or diction that places us firmly in the world of academic discourse. In reading these pages, we learn some things about the second half of the nineteenth century that we may or may not have known (a magician named Harry Kellar worked with a mechanical stage puppet-prop called ‘Psycho’; Susan Blow’s father was named Henry Taylor Blow). Further,

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The slip was quick. Howison rather suddenly found himself terminated by MIT, and could no longer afford his assistant the tether of respectable employment in his area of interest. Within a week of this devastating blow, the boom fell in Kip Ketchem’s ill-fated gambit for a portion of the Ketchum estate. Disenfranchised and unemployed, Inyard appears to have conceived a parlous scheme to enrich himself, in the hopes (however implausible) of thereby becoming a suitable match for Susan. Increasingly preoccupied with her celebrated school reform programs, Susan began to drift from what had perhaps only ever been a momentary deflection from her customary untouchability — by this time already fabled.⁽¹⁹⁾

The skyhook upon which Ketchem proposed to grapple himself to fortune, fame, and connubial bliss took the unlikely form of an itinerant American magician, who was himself at that moment a bit behind the clouds in what was otherwise a luminous trajectory across the firmament of stardom: Harry Kellar, later to be known as the “Dean of American Magic” (perhaps best remembered today as the tutor of Harry Houdini).⁽²⁰⁾ Inyard first witnessed Kellar’s show during the latter’s four-week residency at Boston’s Horticultural Hall in the winter of 1878. The show, he confided to Blow, “was a luminous grace that lit in me a great inventiveness, an answer to a query I had not knowingly posed, and yet the possibility of whose solution delivers me an untold thrill.”⁽²¹⁾

(19) Inyard’s psychical economy at this moment was by no means balanced. In the immediate aftermath of his firing and failed litigation, Howison described his once lively and impassioned protégé as “comporting [himself] increasingly as if a man possessed,” and cautioned Inyard that “the moribund fixity of the mind upon fate’s upturning reversals prepares certain passage unto a gray purgatory of the heart.” The first quote is from Howison to Davidson, October 4, 1878. Howison Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley (BANC MSS C-B 1037), Box 1. The second appears in Howison to “I. K.,” no date, which can be found in the same collection in Box 6, interleaved with the “letters of recommendation.”

(20) Kellar, recently returned from Brazil, experienced considerable commercial adversity in 1878–1879, precipitated by a series of damaging (though false) accusations that he had changed his name to capitalize on the reputation of the recently deceased American magician Robert Heller. For details, see: Milbourne Christopher, *The Illustrated History of Magic* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1973).

(21) I. M. to “Lightning-Bird,” December 29, 1878. This letter was found in 1992, rather inexplicably buried (adroitly, it should be said) among the papers of Susan’s father, Henry Taylor Blow. Blow Family Papers, Missouri Historical Society (record indicator A0139), Box 2. “I. M.” corresponds to *Indicator major*, the nineteenth-century name for the “great-

Figure 1. Several pages from a work of history. Or, anyway, from a historical work. Or, perhaps better, from a work that is doing, we believe, historical work (see text for details).

Most intriguing for Inyard was Kellar's famous mechanical puppet "Psycho," whose Chinese-silk dragon-adorned garb recalled the "wise men" of the Orient, and who, despite the stage-hand operator's underground (or, rather, under-*stage*) manual employment of a variety of bellows and glass cylinders, was presented to a delighted audience as a supposed "automaton" that could effortlessly dispatch games of whist and nap and could also, with an easeful motion of the head, answer varied and spontaneous yes-or-no questions.

Inyard was evidently drawn to the psychophysical-cum-pedagogical potentialities of such an invention, and presented himself to Kellar as "a philosopher from Harvard" with a keen interest in the vagaries of apperception and volitional attention, suggesting that the two meet over dinner during the magician's brief residency in Cambridge. At that Cambridge *rencontre* (Kellar began performing a two-week run at the local Union Hall in January of 1879), Inyard clearly proposed to the magician some form of collaboration, which Kellar, perhaps sensing in his interlocutor a disquieted mind, declined to inaugurate. Subsequently, we find that Inyard was a consistent (and increasingly menacing) presence at all but two of the magician's Union Hall performances — the last of which saw an explosive post-show scrap between the two men, wherein, according to a brief notice in the following morning's *Cambridge Chronicle*, "the gallant Dr. Kellar was molested by a disequilibrated detractor whose rude and libelous ravings were arrested by the timely intervention of one of Dr. Kellar's amiables, who struck the uncorked upstart a firm blow on the fleshy part of the nose."⁽²²⁾

Undaunted by this compromising display of public instability (and its rebuke), Inyard threw himself with redoubled vim into importuning Kellar, hectoring his live presentations and keeping up

er honeyguide" or what is now designated the *Indicator indicator*. These birds, native to sub-Saharan Africa, are noted for their unusual behavior: they are known to make "pointing" displays that "lead" humans (and sometimes, it is reported, nonhuman animals) to the location of beehives. "Indicator major" is the bird name associated with the initials "Y. K.-K." in the Davidson Papers slip referenced *supra* n. 11, so we can reasonably infer that it was Inyard's adopted moniker in his association with the Order. "Lightning-Bird" corresponds to the initials "S. B." in the same document. Ketchem is clearly communicating with Blow within the cloak of Bird-intimacy. It is perhaps further worth noting that the legend of the "lightning-bird" was associated, in the folkloric traditions of Europe, with a young man's discovery of the color of the hair of his future bride. See: Walter K. Kelly, *Curiosities of Indo-European Tradition and Folklore* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1863), p. 101.

(22) "Magic of the Fist," *Cambridge Chronicle*, January 16, 1879.

Figure 2. Several pages from a work of history. Or, anyway, from a historical work. Or, perhaps better, from a work that is doing, we believe, historical work (see text for details).

a steady barrage of private correspondence. A portion of the latter enterprise is preserved in a canvas pouch of unmoored epistolary invective (from the available evidence, mostly unsent) that, recalling a Dostoevskian protagonist, mingles haughty, grandiloquent recriminations ("in your smug and careless handling of our friendship, you have slapped down the one hand that would raise you to an otherwise-impossible height of intellective prowess and social utility") with desperate and flagellant self-scorn ("pity me, then, who is hopeless before you, an imposter denuded of his secreting guise").⁽²³⁾ These missives go on to charge Kellar with, among other things, "witting pedagogical travesty," "the famishment of the public good," "pulverizing the eager impressionable," and curiously, "attributing to the faculty of sensorial apperception a smallness criminally incommensurate with its teachable inborn potential." (One particularly colorful note, scrawled on the back of a counterfeit five-dollar bill, concludes with the thrice-repeated declamation, "Fraud! Fraud! Fraud!"⁽²⁴⁾)

It is quite possible that Kellar's hasty flight back to Brazil in April of 1879 can be attributed to Ketchem's unstinting aggressions. Be that as it may, Ketchem had by no means entirely lost his mind. Indeed, some Hamlet-esque prevarication and performative trickery possibly informed the whole episode, in that no sooner does Kellar clear customs (bound for Rio), than a hitherto unknown magical act surfaces in his wake — in at least one known instance actually taking over show dates previously billed to the better-known entertainer. So it was that "The MYSTICAL ORIENTAL VISHRAMA and his ingenious aide, the PHENOMANL YARDAM [*sic*]" opened to a baffled and delighted public at Buckley's Minstrel Hall in Boston in May, and proceeded, through the winter of 1882, to play to modest but reliably packed houses in cosmopolitan and rural areas throughout Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York.

(23) The collection is privately held, but can be consulted in the Tannen Magic Manuscripts Collection, in the wooden correspondence file cases beside the library, filed under "Keller [*sic*]."

(24) The bill is not, perhaps, properly called a "counterfeit," as it is only printed to resemble the 1875 series Andrew Jackson bill on the recto, the verso having been left blank. Kellar apparently had such ersatz and attention-grabbing "bills" printed as enticing advertising circulars for his shows, and he is also known to have used them as calling cards. He ceased the practice several years later, when it embroiled him in a legal case (a patron of one of his shows allegedly used one of the calling cards to purchase ale in a tavern in Philadelphia, and the publican pressed charges).

Figure 3. Several pages from a work of history. Or, anyway, from a historical work. Or, perhaps better, from a work that is doing, we believe, historical work (see text for details).

we discern, if implicitly, that someone has done research in archival and published sources in order to recover the story we are reading, which ultimately looks to be about the entanglements of two figures (Ketchem and Kellar) both of whom seem to have been interested in perception and illusion – albeit from slightly different, and possibly incommensurable perspectives (one claiming to be a ‘philosopher from Harvard’ and the other working the carnival circuit as a conjuror).

The discovery that no historical person by the name of ‘Inyard Kip Ketchem’ actually existed in the nineteenth century (or, for that matter, before or after) would immediately ring a gong of concern about these three pages, and call severely into question the reliability of the long, detailed, and elaborate scholarly volume from which they have been drawn.

Acknowledging, then, that Inyard Kip Ketchem is indeed an invention, it will perhaps be worth taking a moment to review our options as we reassess the kind of thing these two pages might be.

*

We might first of all consider the possibility that the document is a fraud, pure, and simple. Which is to say, we might propose that this is a fragment of a work that aims to *deceive* – a kind of ‘fake news’ in the realm of scholarship. A work of fraud intentionally and systematically endeavors to create (and sustain) a false representation, one that often works to the fraudster’s own advantage, or the detriment of others. It is characteristic of such deceptions that they do everything possible to evade detection, and multiply evidences of authenticity, often in the form of a narrative of discovery in which the author becomes the sole intermediary figure between the public and one or another repository of the lost or as-yet-unknown (e.g. a private archive or inaccessible archaeological site). More context might be required to understand if the work in question is a proper fraud, but it is difficult to make out how the creator of such an elaborate scholarly fiction could plausibly benefit from it.

Let’s consider another possibility. Perhaps the work is a *joke*? It might be a species of that fusty game we could call ‘high-table drollery’ (or maybe better just ‘erudite dorkiness’): one of those elaborate *jeux d’esprit* of the kind that cements professional community or gently ostracizes *hoi polloi*. While a fraud seeks to benefit by deception, a joke can trace the boundaries of a collective, or even provide an excuse for its formation.¹ It is a matter of uneasy consensus that Princeton classicist Coleman-Norton’s (1950) ‘An Amusing Agraphon’ was a highly academic joke played on (or played *with*) similarly equipped colleagues – although it is

also true that the article remained, for two decades, quietly ensconced in the august pages of the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, until one of the professor's former students publicly named it a playful forgery. Coleman-Norton's 'Agraphon' is thus something of a gelastic limit case (or perhaps a *hapax legomenon*, to use its preferred vocabulary) since, while deliberate internal cues abound as to its humorous and fictive nature, these are easy to miss amid the formidable apparatus of erudition mobilized by the author in service of his fiction.² There is perhaps something of a Coleman-Norton-style academic costume-act in the Ketchem passage, though it is important to note that there is no obvious 'punchline'.

Still another good-faith reader might initially take the Ketchem pages to be tapping into the rich vein of *satire*. On this analysis, the author or authors, having found something in the discipline of history, as the academy practices it today, worthy of ridicule or denunciation, has/have here set out to expose or to deflate. Satire, like forgery, often mimics both the substance and the style of its objects, and academic satire – from the 'campus novel' to the postmodernist salad of Alan Sokal's 'quantum hermeneutics' – is defined by its ear for the formulas (tics?) that work in academic spaces to manifest authority, charisma, and insight. But satires tend not to hold their cards close to their chest, and instead rather mercilessly lay them out, outbidding their victims at every turn. This is difficult to discern in the Ketchem text, and it is hard to see what, exactly, it might be satirizing. The material has no sharp edges; it doesn't bite.

There is also, of course, a history of literary forgeries and games that dovetail comfortably (or uncomfortably) with *the practice and consumption of literature itself*. A number of salient examples are well known. Thomas Chatterton, after inventing the medieval monk Thomas Rowley (along with his poetry), died by his own hand at 17 and became a legend; James Macpherson's great 'translations' of the epic Gaelic poetry of Ossian were based on a wide-ranging and deeply sympathetic knowledge of the oral traditions that he made speak. The Chattertons and 'Rowleys' and MacPhersons of literary history – along with the many messages found in bottles or unearthed in mysterious vaults, and all the workman-like frame tales of gothic mystery and secret knowledge – all belong to the 'romantic bibliographic imaginary', where the half-mythical forces thought to reside in books must be tended and stoked.³ Thus properly *literary* forgers and their readers (to borrow a line from Mark Hofmann's forged Dickinson) 'seek solace in what [they] cannot know'.

Working within this space, and heightening its pedagogical or apotropaic ambitions, is the *mystification*. A genre tracing its origins

in the age of the *Encyclopédie*, and arguably aligned with the core dynamics of critical reason in that period, the ‘mystification’ can be understood, in the words of Julia Abramson to ‘point [...] toward the processes by which it came into being, anatomizing both the artificing of writing and the promotion of a text to the status of literature’ (Abramson 2005, 22). Along the way, the mystification activates a kind of ‘dramaturgy of enlightenment’: by leading readers across their own deception and undeception, the mystification teaches readers about their own mechanisms of belief and critique. We might say that a mystification is a ‘(temporary) deception with a good heart’, or a ‘deception that wishes to be revealed as such – so that *learning* may thereby occur’. The mystification is an interesting and important genre, one that is delicate, and perhaps easily swamped by contemporary concerns about pernicious falsifications in the public sphere. There may well be something of the mystification in the Ketchem pages, though it is hard to say for certain in the absence of thicker contextual information.

Shall we also briskly consider whether the work is simply ‘fiction’ – an extract, say, from some kind of steroidal historical novel? It is not impossible. After all, from the swelling main of the literary canon to the Harlequin shallows, historical fiction often relies on a knowledge of the past at the very least commensurate with the knowledges of academic historians.⁴ And there is indeed a line of historicizing fictions that runs through Nabokov and Borges in which the elaborate stylistic (and epistemic) conventions of scholarship are redeployed in the name of expressive literature. Readers familiar with a certain line of modernist and postmodernist literary practices will know that this has been an active zone of experimentation.⁵ One thinks, for instance, of Jean D’Ormesson’s *Gloire de l’Empire* ([1971] 2016), which scrupulously traces the history of an unnamed ‘Empire’ through primary and secondary sources *both invented and non*. In a related way, the avant-garde poet Armand Schwerner creates his work by means of the untranslatable ellipses, variant readings, and lacunae in his translation of invented Akkado-Sumerian sacred texts in *The Tablets* (complete edition 1999). More recently, the MacArthur Grant award-winning African American author John Keene has deployed related techniques in his immensely powerful *Counternarratives* (2015), a work of fiction that is itself in conversation with Saidiya Hartman’s important notion of ‘critical fabulation’, a technique by which missing historical archives are creatively (and critically) supplemented by literary and imaginative techniques (Hartman 2008).⁶

In an older scholarship on related conventions, the French theorist Gérard Genette once suggested the category of ‘imaginary apocrypha’ for those works of literature consisting of inventing authors and then both writing and interpreting their texts (Genette 1997). But a veritable Cambrian explosion of terms has multiplied the differentia in this ecology – ‘superfiction’ and ‘parafiction’ (Lambert-Beatty 2009) are commonly heard (and older terminology like ‘surfiction’ and ‘critifiction’ can still be found).⁷ The lexicon of such undertakings continues to circulate and evolve, variously defining a wide range of literary-artistic practices whose definitive genealogy remains to be written.⁸ It is essential to note, too, that the historian cannot but discern significant echoes of the ‘pre-modern’ sounding through the carnival energies of these self-consciously postmodern modes: making and understanding, pastiche and recovery, forgery and criticism all assorted very differently in the pre-Enlightenment period, with results that can feel uncannily adjacent to current experimentation (Burnett and Grafton 2009b, 2009a).⁹

*

At this point we will come clean. We were part of the collective that wrote the Ketchem text (“‘Fix Your Eyes Right Here!’: The Life and Times of Inyard Kip Ketchem, the Performing Attention Doctor”), so we are, in different ways, the ‘authors’ of this excerpt. These three pages are in fact drawn from a recently published work of what we would call ‘conjectural historiography’: *In Search of the Third Bird* (Burnett, Hansen, and Smith 2021). More than a decade in the making, and representing a collaboration between more than a dozen artists, scholars, and writers, this unusual volume runs to more than 750 pages, each of them a rich tissue of demanding actual history and no less demanding historical conjuration.¹⁰ It is a difficult book, and a strange one. But it is also a book from which we, as authors, feel we have learned a great deal. Which is to say, the making of the book has been *instructive*: vigorously intellectual, historical, participatory, and immersive. We propose to consider how aspects of this experience may be made more widely available.¹¹

As the paragraphs above suggest, we believe material like those Ketchem pages (and the book from which they come) is in no way properly designated as ‘fraud’, and cannot be assimilated without remainder to the category of the ‘joke’. While we do have literary ambitions for our project, we propose here to bracket them, and to focus on the potential value of this kind of work as a form of ‘historying’ in Greg Denning’s sense.¹²

Over the last decade, we have grown interested in the pedagogical import and intellectual richness of these forms of disciplined historical ‘conjuring’. That interest has motivated us severally (as individual authors/teachers/scholars), and collaboratively. In our forays into this area (forays that have straddled the domains of art and academe), we believe we have attained to proper ‘historical insights’ – both insights into the past, and into the way history is made – of durable significance for each of us. Our aim in what remains of this essay is to try to tease out something of what can be learned from making (and reading) work of this kind – works of the imagination that are, at the same time, *deeply* scholarly, and achieved through the recrossing of research and the imagination. We will argue that there is space for us, as teachers and historical thinkers, to work more in this genre, which (while not without its perils) offers unique opportunities for an immersive and vitalizing encounter with the past.

Please note that we do *not* mean to suggest that these sorts of metafiction should in any way ‘replace’ traditional historically oriented humanistic scholarship. All of us have contributed work in perfectly conventional veins to our respective disciplines (history of science, English poetics, comparative literature, philosophy). We are, each of us, committed to scholarly historical work of a recognizably disciplinary form. We do think, however, that, in the context of ongoing challenges to the university standing of the humanistic fields, and in conjunction with larger shifts in cultures of pedagogy, performance, and participation, the making and critical reading of research-intensive metafiction stands as an important and under-explored opportunity for dynamic engagement with historical thought.¹³ We are in need of new ways of *activating* the past, and rendering its exploration a creative and imaginative practice. We have caught glimpses of such a possibility in our recent work, and hope to encourage further experimentation and discussion.

Some important context: we surely took inspiration, in our work, from an early and brilliant foray into the genre, Ken Alder’s ‘History’s Greatest Forger: Science, Fiction, and Fraud along the Seine’. Published in *Critical Inquiry* in 2004, this dazzling essay is perhaps the best-known instance of what we would call a ‘scholarly metafiction’, a category we will discuss in some detail below. Alder’s article presents what is purportedly a translation from the French of a letter from prison written by the notorious nineteenth-century forger Denis Vrain-Lucas to Michel Chasles, the collector he had been caught defrauding. This is, then, we come to understand, the falsification of

the work of a master falsifier, and thus in a certain light it is plainly an *homage*. At the same time, however, it is a significant contribution to theoretical reflection on the value and aims of scholarship in the history of science, amply succeeding in doing what humanistic scholarship in the overwhelming majority of cases sets out to do through straightforward assertions and arguments made in the voice of a text's true author. For Alder, however, the metafictional conceit underlies and enables a far bolder argument than he might otherwise dare to make, for he is in effect making the case for, as it were, a Vrain-Lucasian philosophy of history, at least as he, Alder, imagines the character of Vrain-Lucas.

The *real*, historical forger produced countless letters of key figures in the history of science, notably Galileo, Pascal, and Newton. Over time, the claims and discoveries he attributed to them (and the correspondents he allowed them to have) became increasingly unconstrained by what others thought they had known about these figures, and it was in part this expanding 'license' that in the end brought about the forger's fall. But in Alder's rendition, Vrain-Lucas is not only unapologetic about his inventiveness, but continues, even in prison, to see his letters as true and proper contributions to the history of science, to the extent that they effectively 'reanimated' the thinkers to whom they were attributed, and illustrated the usefulness of the faculty of the imagination in working our way back into their world of concerns. Alder's Vrain-Lucas accuses his dupe, Chasles, of having *actually* known all along the true origin of 'Galileo's' letters, and all the others – just as readers of *Critical Inquiry* (likely) know the true origin of Vrain-Lucas's 'letter' as brought to light by Alder. This 'Vrain-Lucas' insists that he, the forger, was providing a legitimate and valuable service to someone who in any case 'wanted to believe' and was only aided in his study of the history of science by Vrain-Lucas's satisfaction of this desire.

Alder's text is self-explicative, attributing to its fictionalized author, and to its invented primary source, a philosophical commitment to imaginative and immersive history that the true author of the piece manifestly shares. Alder's Vrain-Lucas is someone who 'loves history', and who repeatedly asserts that his detractors *do not love history enough*. We will not say, here, that the real forger, the *veritable* Vrain-Lucas, 'loved history' or 'provided a service to historians'; we are however comfortable in holding up Alder as an example of someone who *does indeed* love history, and who is able to convey this love, and perhaps also to spread it, by taking up the voice of a forger.

What are some of the qualities of works like this? Works that entangle themselves in a ‘makerly’ way with the histories they tell? In what ways does work like this advance the general program of historically oriented humanistic inquiry?

Well, for starters, *there is a LOT of ‘history’ in this kind of work*. Which is to say, one must both know and convey a great deal of detailed knowledge of the past in order to create a work of scholarly metafiction. Alder’s command of the Vrain-Lucas episode is virtuosically on display in his essay. In writing about Inyard Kip Ketchem we immersed ourselves in the early history of psychophysics in the United States, and read most of the specialized literature on pre-behaviorist physiology of perception. We also spent hundreds of hours of reading time on the history of American popular magic, William James, and the Saint Louis Movement. The precise timing of Harry Kellar’s trip to Brazil mattered to the elaboration of his conflict with Ketchem, and we also had to make sure we were avoiding any tell-tale anachronisms in our citations from Ketchem’s correspondence – which necessitated both an immersive familiarity with turn of the century English prose conventions in educated circles of the Northeast establishment, and word-by-word scrutiny of our draft material, using Google-books, to test for the period availability of given terms and phrases.

So far, then, our argument can perhaps be summed up by a truism: good pastiche requires true mastery of its object. And scholarly metafiction is certainly, in some sense, a species of pastiche.

But there is more to be said about the value of this kind of work. The last 20 years have seen a remarkable upsurge of interest, both inside the academy and beyond, in ‘makers’ knowledge’. We see evidence for this in the ‘makers’ movement’ and ‘makers’ labs’ that have arisen at the nexus of hacker-culture and DIY enthusiasms, and in the resurgence of interest in craft (likely occasioned by the broader cultural trends of dematerialization and deskilling). In their invaluable history of the idea of ‘objectivity’, the historians of science Peter Galison and Loraine Daston (2007) go so far as to argue for a convergence of science and engineering in recent decades, leading to a new kind of ‘synthetic’ discourse in which presentation and representation achieve a scintillating instability. In a related way, scholarly work in a number of fields has turned to ‘making’ with gusto: art historians have renewed their interest in practice and materials; the new on-campus significance of creative writing programs has implicated the ‘makerly’ facets of literary study. Indeed, it can seem as if every branch of the university wants to figure out how to make their domain

of study feel ‘hands on’. The history of science and technology has been particularly preoccupied with the place of tacit knowledge, material culture, and knack or ‘feel’ in a series of reassessments of the study of chemistry, physics, biology, and engineering. Lab-based courses and broader research enterprises currently engage in experimental reconstructions of alchemical recipes, smelting techniques, and other get-your-hands-dirty aspects of what has long been construed as an essentially ‘epistemic’ project: knowing nature.

Over the last several years, working on a number of collaborative projects of scholarly metafiction of some intricacy, we have come to suspect that aspects of this work ought properly to be understood as affording a kind of ‘makerly’ relationship to the historical knowledge. And this can be a powerful experience.

It is, moreover, an experience our students increasingly crave. Those who announce the ‘end of literacy’ (and the collapse of the readerly-hermeneutic cultures on which the university humanities have depended) surely exaggerate. But it is impossible to overlook the profound changes to textual experience that have accompanied the rise of ubiquitous data-intensive, ‘navigable’, and relentlessly intermediated digital technologies – technologies through which, increasingly, we experience the majority of our waking hours. Immersive long-form reading has become an exception across the board: we read by means of cross-references, intertextual circuits, the ‘epistemology of the search’ (Joselit 2013), and forms of what N. Kathrine Hayles (2007) has called ‘hyper-attention’ (but which looks a lot like networked distraction).¹⁴ Confronting this new ecology, we who care about the past, and about its legacies, and about the forms of life that encourage a lively exploration of the relationship between then and now, *we must seek new ways to create the ‘conditions of opportunity’ for historical thinking.*

The conceptualization and execution of scholarly metafictions provide one such opportunity, and one that can genuinely catalyze exciting historical inquiry.¹⁵ Just to cite one recent example from some of our recent teaching, in the Spring of 2020 one of us, D. Graham Burnett, was teaching an undergraduate seminar on ‘Food, Science, and the Environment’ in the history department at Princeton. As the pandemic struck, and coursework shifted suddenly to an emergency online footing, a decision was made to have the students begin maintaining a collaborative diary of the place of food in the experience of the crisis. At the end of the term, with some faculty encouragement, the students undertook a remarkable final project: together, using their own

collaborative pandemic journal as a ‘primary source’, they designed the syllabus for a future class on ‘Food, Science, and the Environment’ – a course they set *in 2070*. Not only did they dream a whole list of readings that would handle the post-COVID ‘remote revolution’ as they imagined it, but they also *drafted significant portions of those (conjured) sources*. The result, published in the *Public Domain Review* and subsequently praised in the *TLS*, displays not only a laudable understanding of theories of historical change, but also an astounding command over the way the development of historical knowledge *actually works*.

Relatedly, the Mellon Foundation recently supported a remarkable initiative to convene a summer workshop for students of history, design, film, and psychology, who, together with a leading historian of the human sciences, made use of rich archival research and a host of creative skills to achieve a series of ‘reconstructions’ of a set of missing films from the silent era. These films, made by the German-American psychologist and film-theorist, Hugo Münsterberg, were the earliest mass psychological tests realized in the twentieth century. They appear to be forever lost. By dint of a ‘makerly’ orientation to humanistic research, a team of students and scholars achieved stunning *simulations* of these originals. These are scholarly metafictional, not ‘fakes’. They do not parade as actual primary sources. They are, rather, an achievement of actual scholarly effort, which opens multiple windows into the past: the windows opened by the collaborative effort at re-animation and re-creation; the windows opened for those who get to witness and puzzle over the results, *with an understanding of the work they represent* (Blatter, [forthcoming](#)).¹⁶

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There is more to say. A full defense of projects like these would require a turn through rich recent discussions of ‘archival poetics’ (one thinks of the work of artists as diverse as Susan Howe and Walid Raad), as well as an engagement with the fate of Hayden White’s deep and challenging wager, in *Metahistory*, that disciplinary history’s entrapment in the ‘ironic’ mode requires, if liberation is possible, a kind of ironic pivot on irony itself (White 1973, xii).¹⁷ Frank Ankersmit’s controversial notion of the *Sublime Historical Experience* (Ankersmit 2005) is not irrelevant to metafictional historiography, in that one can come, through such practices, to the threshold of an uncanny intimacy with the past – what might be thought of as the affective registration of the central phenomenology of hermeneutic understanding (what Gadamer describes, beautifully, as ‘the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in

returning to itself from what is other' (Gadamer 2013, 13)). A kind of 'rapture of the deep' in the archives will never replace the forms of peer-reviewed knowledge production to which the modern historical 'sciences' have committed themselves. Nor should they. But if epistemology can always be reconstructed through figurations of 'distance' and 'perspective', it seems plausible to think of actual *touching* as a non-trivial limit case, and scholarly metafictionalizations permit us to run our fingers through the stuff of the past in a very particular way.¹⁸

It might be possible to read us as having posited an 'unproblematic' kind of 'proper history' (fact-based, empirical, rooted in *Wissenschaft*) and, perhaps, juxtaposed this with an (equally?) unproblematic 'fiction' (imaginative, creative, untethered to the real). Having thus arrayed the pieces on the board, our project of scholarly metafictionalizations is then permitted to sweep into the no-man's land as a happy griffin, without obligation to either side. We don't think this account is faithful to our intentions. The deep questions concerning the epistemic foundations of historical knowledge have not been our subject in these pages. We are four different persons, and we have independent views of the work of Dilthey and Koselleck, Rheinberger and Hacking. Because several of us are formed in the history and philosophy of science, our views on the kind of knowledge that is possible concerning the past are not simplistic, but be that as it may, we do not even perfectly agree as to the final nature of interpretive historicism. Moreover, fiction itself is only the 'opposite' of the 'truth' in a very limited way. Issues of this scope are well beyond the program of this short article, which does not purport to be an intervention in historical epistemology or narrative theory. What we have worked to address in these pages is a matter of *historical practice* – meaning the actual past-oriented activity of historians, their students, and those who come to historical writings in the hopes of achieving richer and deeper historical consciousness. In this context, we have called for a wider openness to disciplined techniques of creative making within the idioms of scholarly history, a technique we believe accords with notable cultural trends, and offers new promise to those of us vocationally committed to the work of historical understanding. The staggering irruption of GPT-3 and GPT-4-driven text and image production, just in the last year, have trumpeted the urgency of new thinking about the kind of work that can hold our students to the ever-renewed work of reflecting on the past. We believe the approaches we have outlined above lend themselves to integration with the explosive dynamism of these new generative systems.

But let us put all these issues aside, to consider, in closing, a question of the utmost importance – and one that has surely been on the reader’s mind. The question of truth. And lies.

Surely we should be immensely worried about the way that such works seemingly elide critical distinctions between what is true and what is not true? Indeed. Everything we have said so far is very definitely shadowed by a risk: the basic risk of introducing fiction where the reader might expect fact. These is a fraught matter at any moment, but the last decade has seen a very real and reasonable escalation of concern in this domain.¹⁹

To be clear, like Alder in his *Critical Inquiry* piece, we have, ourselves, no interest in ‘punking’ anyone. To that end, our intricate book of scholarly metafiction *comes with its own set of negative peer reviews*, helpfully written by distinguished historians (of considerable literary gifts).²⁰ Our aim here, in working with these collaborating negators, was to ensure that any reader picking up the book had full and fair warning as to the composite nature of the work in question.

We will not pretend to be able to offer a simple or covering defense of scholarly metafiction with respect to the potential risks at play in such work. Ethical and political judgments must be contextual and specific. Are there hypothetical instances of such work we would deplore? To be sure. But so, too, there are instances of abstemiously veridical archival truth-telling we would also deplore. Those who experiment with conjectural historiography and the vivifying powers of imagination and invention must take special care to be responsible in this work: responsible to readers, to history, and to the past. Exactly what this will mean will vary according to the commitments of authors, the nature of the material, and the circumstances. To attempt to legislate in this domain would be a perfectly inappropriate project for a speculative essay like this one. What we can say is that we have ourselves been enormously concerned with this problem, and it is incumbent upon anyone who proposes to work in this space to think carefully about the normative topography such forms of historical imagination must navigate.

Ultimately, neither truth nor fiction can save us, and neither can bring the past back or take us to it. Neither can ‘do justice’ to history – or, what is more urgently wanted, to the present. But hybrid works of the scholarly imagination have, we believe, a role to play in the ongoing project of nurturing historical consciousness.

Notes

1. One thinks, for instance, of the elaborate culture of the so-called ‘Crabtree Orations’ or the many games of the College of ‘Pataphysics (Bennett and Harte 1997).
2. In his published essay, Coleman-Norton described coming across a Greek manuscript fragment bearing the as-yet unrecorded words [*a-grapha*] of Jesus of Nazareth. When asked by his disciples whether those without teeth will be able to participate in Hell’s generalized weeping and gnashing, Jesus is quoted as explaining that ‘teeth will be provided’ (Coleman-Norton 1950, 443). Coleman-Norton wryly commented that ‘either an ancient wag has been at work here or the incident occurred substantially as recorded’ (Coleman-Norton 1950, 444). The former was true, and the ‘ancient’ in question was Professor Coleman-Norton. ‘Gelastics’ is a serious/funny term for the technical study of jokes.
3. See, for instance, Piper (2009), *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age*.
4. And this is only the tip of this iceberg. On the larger issues at stake, a valuable point of departure is the special issue (2010) of *Rethinking History* edited by James Goodman, *History as Creative Writing*. It should be added that *Rethinking History* as a journal was founded with a strong commitment to experimentation at the juncture of history and fiction.
5. The most obvious theoretical framing is Linda Hutcheon’s notion of a ‘historiographical metafiction’, defined in her valuable *Poetics of Postmodernism* (Hutcheon 1988).
6. Hartman’s notion of critical fabulation has proven widely generative for those working in the history of post-colonial subjectivity, feminist historiography, and the history of subaltern and enslaved people. See her original formulation in ‘Venus in Two Acts’ (Hartman 2008). For a fascinating recent activation of this kind of work (one which works, as we also attempt, in the borderlands where literary, historical, and artistic practices can be said to overlap), consider the remarkable ‘Visionary Aponte: Art and Black Freedom’ project, conceived and led by professors Ada Ferrer and Linda Rodriguez (2015 forward). This project has involved a series of efforts to conceive/generate/express/represent the (missing) ‘book of paintings’ produced by the Cuban revolutionary activist José Antonio Aponte, executed in 1812 in Havana for insurrection.
7. Parafiction is Lambert-Beatty’s (2009) term, and it has seen wide application in the contemporary visual arts, assisting in the interpretation of a number of politically-oriented archival conjurers and artist-tricksters.
8. But consider, Ruthven (2001), *Faking Literature*, and the more recent study: Burrows and O’Sullivan (2019), *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*.
9. This is discussed in Burnett and Grafton’s ‘Deception as a Way of Knowing’ (Burnett and Grafton 2009b, 69–76) and related correspondence in *Cabinet* 34 (Burnett and Grafton 2009a, 57)

10. For further contextualization of the volume, the reader may wish to consider a series of published reviews, interviews, and relevant discussions, including: a conversation in the online blog series of *The Journal of the History of Ideas* (Catlin and Burnett 2022), a joint piece in *Lapham's Quarterly* (Kishik and Burnett 2023), a review in the *Brooklyn Rail* (Duarte-Riascos 2022), another in *The Cleveland Review* (Schmidt 2022), and perhaps the most detailed in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (Massot 2022).
11. We will bracket, for the purpose of this essay on historical practice and pedagogy, a wider engagement with the research collective out of which this book (and other related projects) have come. But a word on this aspect of the publication is perhaps in order. *In Search of the Third Bird* is the collaborative work of a community of artists, writers, and scholars who identify as associates of the 'Esthetical Society for Transcendental and Applied Realization (now incorporating the Society of Esthetic Realizers)' or ESTAR(SER). This group can be sorted with other programs of ludo-critical academicism and artistic research. ESTAR(SER) concerns itself with the history of 'attention', though it undertakes this work via a Borgesian preoccupation with lost texts, dream archives, and fugitive objects of inquiry. The group works in text, performance-lecture, participatory programming, and various installations/object-constellations. The recent exhibition, *THE THIRD, MEANING*, at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, Washington (October 2022 – October 2023) represents a major show drawing on the group's work over the last decade, which has included programs at the Palais de Tokyo (Paris), Manifesta 11 (Zurich), MoMA PS 1 (New York), the IMA (Brisbane), the Barnes Foundation (Philadelphia), AIT (Tokyo), the Asian Arts Theater (Gwangju), the Museo Tamayo (Mexico City), the Reina Sofia (Madrid), and the 32nd São Paulo Biennial.
12. Denning discusses this idea in a number of places, but a good summary can be found in 'Performing Cross-Culturally' in *Manifestos for History*, edited by Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (2007, 98–108). See also, for comparison, the discussion of the concept of 'pastology' formulated by Hayden White at the end of his career. He discusses the notion in several late interviews, and in print in *The Practical Past* (White 2014, 99)
13. One thinks, for instance, of the rapid growth and vitality of the 'Performance Philosophy' group (and their eponymous journal). Also relevant, the rich and revealed complexity of historical reenactment, and other forms of performative historical practice, in and beyond traditional public history. See, for instance: Iain McCalman and Paul Pickering, eds. McCalman and Pickering (2010), *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn*; Thompson (2004), *War Games: Inside the World of 20th-Century War Reenactors*. Readers familiar with longstanding debates about the nature of historical knowledge will recognize the term 'reenactment' as a key analytic in the work of R. G. Collingwood, arguably the most significant English-language philosopher of history of the twentieth century (whose work, interestingly, was closely taken up by Gadamer in his reconceptualization of historically-oriented hermeneutics in *Truth and Method*). Collingwood's usage stands at some distance

from that deployed in the context of contemporary ‘reenactment studies’ (Dray 1995).

14. Interestingly, Hayles identified the new form of ‘hyperattention’ in connection with a ‘generational divide’. Fifteen years later, it is hard to see much left of her old guard. We are mostly all assimilated to the new world of online ‘net-reading’, with all its surprising beauties and skimming discomforts.
15. Two recent works that foreground the possibilities of the mode: Vierba (2020), *The Singer’s Needle: An Undisciplined History of Panamá*; and Kishik (2021), *The Manhattan Project: A Theory of a City*.
16. The discussion here references the work of Jeremy Blatter, at Drew University, in the United States. It will be discussed in his new book on Münsterberg, forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press.
17. The classic, and often overlooked formulation appears at the end of the preface, and is worth quoting in full: ‘It may not go unnoticed that this book is itself cast in an Ironic mode. But the Irony which informs it is a conscious one, and it therefore represents a turning of the Ironic consciousness against Irony itself. If it succeeds in establishing that the skepticism and pessimism of so much contemporary historical thinking have their origins in an Ironic frame of mind, and that this frame of mind in turn is merely one of a number of possible postures that one may assume before the historical record, it will have provided some of the grounds for a rejection of Irony itself. And the way will have been partially cleared for the reconstitution of history as a form of intellectual activity which is at once poetic, scientific, and philosophical in its concerns – as it was during history’s golden age in the nineteenth century’. (White 1973, xii). It is a moment in the text that is hard to square (without remainder, anyway) with the tendency to associate White’s legacy with a kind of deconstructive enterprise. We might construe our interest in scholarly metafiction as a complement to Ethan Kleinberg’s call for a ‘deconstructive approach’ to the past (Kleinberg 2017). We propose, in contrast, a frankly (if disciplined) *constructive* approach. It may be more relevant for a world increasingly concerned with *technical simulation* as the best evidence of understanding.
18. Metaphors of knowledge and distantiation organize Carlo Ginzburg’s Ginzburg (2001) *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*. One thinks of the final chapter of Loraine Daston and Peter Galison’s Daston and Galison (2007) important *Objectivity*, supra n. 15. In Chapter 7, of that book, ‘Representation to Presentation’, the authors argue for a new ‘engineering’ orientation to knowledge, within which, as they put it, ‘Seeing is Making’ (Daston and Galison 2007, 382–412).
19. Justin E.H. Smith has written extensively and publicly on the deranging dynamics of post-truth irrationality. See *Irrationality : A History of the Dark Side of Reason* (Smith 2019). See also *The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is: A History, a Philosophy, a Warning*, (Smith 2022). For a specific look at the shifting politics of the issue, consider D. Graham Burnett’s ‘In Lies Begin Responsibilities’ in *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness* edited by Elizabeth Armstrong (2012, 192–205)

20. We are especially grateful to Darrin McMahon, Jimena Canales, and Benjamin Breen for their contributions in this regard: their funny and dead-eyed clarifications properly put the reader on notice concerning the games of *In Search of The Third Bird*.

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