

History's Greatest Forger: Science, Fiction, and Fraud along the Seine

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Introduction

Last year, while on academic leave in France, I discovered a letter in a Paris archive, and I present my translation of it below. I realize that subscribers to scholarly journals are rarely asked to read translations of archival documents anymore. Yet by declining to do so, scholars do not, I presume, mean to impugn the authenticity of these manuscripts. In the present case, I hope that they have confidence in the chain of custody that links its author's pen to my presentation and that they trust my knowledge of the French language, as well as my fidelity to the principles of sober editing. Rather, I assume that their reluctance to read such texts stems from their belief that the translation of nineteenth-century manuscripts, whatever their intrinsic interest, no longer offers the sort of value-added originality for which the academy is willing to award credit. I quite agree; it shows no great merit to discover an interesting letter in the archives. Which is to say that we now seem to believe that historians—even historians of science like myself—are expected to provide a kind of creative authorship.

The letter in question, however, would seem to offer an exception to this rule as well as a cautionary tale on just this theme. For myself, I have few doubts as to the document's authenticity, although it comes from the pen of an admitted forger. I am no expert in handwriting analysis, but I think that can be no great obstacle in this case because even an expert might hesitate to pass judgment on so capable a penman. Of course, should any of my readers consider themselves proficient in this art, I would be happy to provide a facsimile. In the meantime, I invite them to judge its verisimilitude for themselves.

The episode referred to in the letter was infamous in its day. If readers need any additional rationale for continuing, I would add that the incident was cited by the eminent sociologist of science Robert K. Merton (recently deceased) in his seminal 1957 article, "Priorities in Scientific Discovery." In that article Merton explained why academic credit is awarded exclusively to those scientists (and scholars) who publish their discoveries first—because, he argued, only priority of publication can assure readers that the published work has not been plagiarized from someone else. In that article, Merton also remarked that "[Michel Chasles's] credulity stretches our own."¹ After reading this letter, I think you will agree. Yet might not such a stretching be just what current scholarship needs if it is ever to practice what it preaches about practice? After all, if writers in the humanities really are determined to expose the sociolinguistic terrain upon which the credulity of scientists is challenged or assuaged, and if they really mean to argue that experiment and the observation of nature are in themselves insufficient to spark controversy or command assent, and if they really want to contend that scientific skepticism and its warrants for belief are generated in part by literary technologies, largely borrowed from domains remote from the hard sciences, then perhaps we ought to take a more expansive view of what counts as a credible account of the past. That is, if a narrow descriptive facticity cannot exhaust the plenitude of nature, why should the plenitude of the human past be more easily encompassed? Yet many historians continue to represent the past in as positivist a mode as any scientist, and they continue to do so using literary technologies—both forms of writing and the presentation of evidence—that historians borrowed back from the natural sciences in the nineteenth century.

The letter that follows is my translation. The text is signed by Denis Vrain-Lucas and was composed on the official prison stationery of the Maison Centrale de Poissy. It is dated 13 August 1871.

1. Robert K. Merton, "Priorities in Scientific Discoveries" (1957), *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, ed. Norman W. Storer (Chicago, 1973), p. 309.

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The Letter

To my most respected Sir, the illustrious academician, Michel Chasles,²

I am writing to you in my own hand—familiar to you at long last—in the hope that I might help you come to terms with the hoax so recently perpetrated upon our beloved enterprise in the field of the history of science and featured so unexpectedly in all the daily newspapers. I will not attempt to deceive you again; I address you with the hope that you will find it in your heart to pardon me. Such a pardon might do more than restore my liberty, it might also restore my reputation, a thing not so easily conferred by the officials in charge of this establishment.

It is true that I acquiesced to the banal sequence of events as recited by the imperial prosecutor—notably, *that I alone had penned the letters so widely believed to be from the hands of Pascal, Newton, Galileo, and others*—letters that you took to be the authentic voices of the past. In that narrow sense, I stand guilty as charged and am now paying the price for my deeds. But I am counting also on our mutual service to a higher authority. Isn't justice supposed to transcend banal chronicle? Isn't that why we have human judges with human hearts, to take account of circumstance and human frailty? And isn't a sense of justice, for that very reason, a prerequisite for

2. The principal archival sources for the antecedent life, opinions, and trial of Vrain-Lucas can be found in the Archives de l'Académie des Sciences (Paris), Dossier Paul Helbronner: Denis Vrain-Lucas to Michel Chasles, 7 Oct. 1869; Vrain-Lucas, "Le Mystère dévoilé" (1869–70); Vrain-Lucas, "Mes Observations sur le rapport de MM. Bordier and Mabilie, experts" (1870); and Vrain-Lucas, "Moyens de défense" (1869). See also the Archives Nationales (Paris), Dossier BB24/725: Vrain-Lucas, "Demand en grâce" (1873); and also the Bibliothèque Nationale, Department of Manuscripts (Paris), Dossier NAF 709: "Specimen des faux autographes fabriqués par Vrain-Lucas"; and Vrain-Lucas, "Galilée, Pascal, Newton: Mémoire motifs qui m'ont fait agir," 20 Sept. 1869. Additional archival sources can be found in the Bibliothèque de l'Institut (Paris); Archives Départementales, Département de la Seine (Paris); Archives Départementales, Département d'Eure-et-Loir (Chartres); and Bibliothèque Municipale de Châteaudun (Châteaudun).

The academic debate over the Vrain-Lucas forgeries can be followed in Alphonse Quetelet et al., *Bulletin de l'Académie royale de Belgique* 22, 2d ser. (1866): 204–7, 343–46, 478–79, 544–45; 23 (1867): 417; 24 (1867): 83, 199–204; and especially in Chasles et al., "Mémoires et communications," *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des sciences* 65 (1867): 89–93; along with many additional references in vols. 65–69 (1867–69).

Contemporary newspapers provide information regarding the academic controversy and the trial; see *L'Amateur d'autographes*, *Le Droit*, *Gazette du tribunaux*, *Les Mondes*, *La Presse* (Paris), *Le Temps*, and *The Times* (London). For published primary sources on the affair, see Henri Bordier and Emile Mabilie, *Une Fabrique de faux autographes, ou récit de l'affaire Vrain-Lucas* (Paris, 1870), trans. under the title *Prince of Forgers*, by Joseph Rosenblum (New Castle, Del., 1998); Étienne Charavay, *Faux autographes: Affaire Vrain-Lucas* (Paris, 1870); Chasles, *Aperçu historique sur l'origine et le développement des méthodes en géométrie* (Brussels, 1837) and *Sur L'Ouvrage de M. Faugère intitulé: Défense de B. Pascal, et accessoirement de Newton, de Galilée, etc.* (Paris, 1868); Armand-Prosper Faugère, *Défense de B. Pascal et accessoirement de Newton, Galilée, Montesquieu, etc. contre les faux documents présentés par M. Chasles à l'Académie des Sciences* (Paris, 1868); Vrain-Lucas, *Le Parfait Secrétaire des grands hommes; ou Les Lettres de Sapho, Platon, Vercingétorix, Cléopâtre, Marie-Madeleine, Charlemagne, Jeanne d'Arc, et autres personnages illustres* (Paris, 1924).

telling the fullest history of our times or of times gone by? If so, then my acquiescence to the prosecutor's banal recitation does not negate the fact that I have at all times acted with patriotism, with honor, and in the service of science and its history. You must therefore read my courtroom confession as a calculated display. You know better than anyone the circumstances that brought us to that dark moment. How the nation's foremost scientific institution—in which you, at age seventy-four, still play a leading role—had become a cuckold in a Feydeau farce, and how the magistrates were determined to right the social order (at my expense!) by shifting the venue to the solemn theater of justice.

I know you feel betrayed, that, thanks to me, you were the victim of a vast mystification. Believe me, honored Sir, I never had the least desire to dishonor you. But I am shut up in this place thanks to your failure of nerve—*your* betrayal, some might say—and there is little I can do here except write letters. I well remember the glorious day you reminded the academy that the myriad manuscripts in your possession could not be the work of a single forger, as no single man could have produced such massive quantities of letters, and of such intellectual rigor and diversity. Now, of course, you must acknowledge me as one of the most prodigious penmen of all time. So if, in the span of seven years, I could compose nearly 30,000 letters emanating from over 600 different authors, then surely I can write one long letter in my own hand. The guards here have supplied me with the regulation ink and paper. My fingers are tough, and I write with great speed. Strange, that my punishment should give me leisure to perform the very task that earned me my sentence.

Who, I ask, has been harmed by my actions? Not you, who wrung my best work from my hand until my fingers ached. I repeat what I said to the prosecutor: nothing you had previously accomplished in mathematics or historical scholarship had ever won you such fame. It is not my fault that your mathematical proofs will be ignored by history but that future historians will forevermore associate you with the ridiculous drama of the past three years. Perhaps it is always thus. Eternal truths do not belong to the individual who has the luck to find them, whereas ephemeral farce is our enduring epitaph because it is entirely our own. As for your 140,000 francs, they hardly equal the value of what I gave you in exchange. You yourself admitted to the magistrate that you had spurned my offer to refund all your money in exchange for the return of all my letters. What? Give back your precious Pascals and Galileos? Surrender your Rabelais and your Charles V? Never!

Nor can the savants of your illustrious academy complain, nor their brother scholars from the other learned societies of Europe. Rarely have

your forty fellow immortals sat with such rapt attention as they did while you read them my beautiful letters! More academics turned out to hear our defense of Pascal than turned out to hear Le Verrier (that impudent astronomer) announce his discovery of Neptune. And more than that, we provided these academicians with a chance to boast of their glorious forefathers in the general circulation newspapers.

Nor can the general public claim to have been harmed—in spite of what the imperial prosecutor said—for by my labors they learned of the glorious accomplishments of seventeenth-century science, of which they are so unforgivably ignorant. For that alone I deserve a scholarly prize, not prison time. Moreover, I sharpened their critical faculties, teaching them to mistrust temporal authority, yes, even the academy itself.

Finally, none of the great savants of the past can claim to have been harmed. For I did more to defend Pascal and Galileo than the historians who claim to be their loyal chroniclers. Of all men, there is only one who might have cause for complaint. But for my part I cannot see how Isaac Newton, a natural philosopher of overweening vanity, notorious for his many scientific piracies and his refusal to credit his precursors, could dare accuse another savant of plagiarism. Besides, Sir Isaac has been dead for 150 years.

No, I cannot feel my guilt. For I have yet to repudiate our eight-year quest to place before the general public the true history of the discovery of the law of universal gravitation, an ignorant public that pays no attention to the history of science, nor even to science, unless it promises technological marvels or the scent of scandal. Bread or circuses! Well, dreary history can never compete with the vibrancy of our age (with all its technological marvels). So I affiliated myself with the circus and set out to resuscitate the great savants as if they were still writing in defense of their revolutionary ideas. And I succeeded—we succeeded—beyond my wildest hopes. Whether you acknowledge it or not, we have been collaborators these past eight years.

In truth, I suppose I should count myself lucky to be here in the Poissy prison. Outside these thick walls, conditions are worse than they are in my cell. Our capital has been ravaged since the gendarmes escorted me from the courtroom! I admit to taking a certain pleasure in knowing that the sanctimonious prosecutors who locked me away have suffered an equivalent loss of freedom. We have seen in our own day how an entire nation can collapse as quickly as a single life; how a great capital can become a jail, a charnel house. Beneath the worn benches of the law courts, the deep pressures of history are always gathering force.

Not that I wished the Germans to be my avengers. Despite the injuries

done to me by France, I weep at the defeat of our armies and the Prussian siege of Paris. Are not the Germans the leading practitioners of the form of history I most despise: the supposedly scientific analysis of original documents? As if such an examination could produce anything but more dusty treatises justifying what everyone has always known. Nor can I help but notice that these professional historians, as they like to call themselves, only learned to cherish these personal letters and unpublished memoranda—scraps formerly used to stuff bedding—after we connoisseurs had initiated a lucrative market for such documents. As always, the amateurs led the way. The first to prize the jottings of Voltaire and Madame Du Châtelet or the proclamations of Louis XIV's great ministers were those men and women who love the past as you and I do. They collected these scratchings, not to assemble them in a web of analysis, but because they had once been touched by the hand of living genius. Each stroke of ink, each signature, was prized for the way it bore the characteristic imprint of the great mind that penned it. Of course we all know how easily love can shade into lust, how the wealthy can bid up the price of pleasure until it becomes a vice. It was not long before a thriving market for such works developed in the stalls along the Seine, and only then, long after these documents had acquired monetary value, did the so-called professional historians suddenly rediscover that the "truth" lay in them alone. I say *rediscover* because the Benedictines of the seventeenth century had once prized such texts—and been mocked as mere chroniclers. Now, every scholar is a Benedictine, convinced the truth lies in assembling these shreds. These *wie es gewesen Menschen* lack the imagination to bring such documents to life and make their long-dead authors enact their grand contradictions. Their version of the past is doomed to remain a miserable affair of subspecialists, cut to suit the needs of their employers. Heaven forbid that such a fate should befall my beloved France. Already it may be too late. The scholarly journals are in their clutches. The publishing houses will soon fall. The faculty at the Sorbonne has begun to imitate the Prussians, as their eighteenth-century forbears slavishly imitated the Newtonians. Our fate lies in the hands of men afraid to answer the creativity of the past with an equal measure of creativity in the present. The German professors will bury us all—once their paymasters have finished raining their mechanical terror down on Paris.

But destruction brings hope of renewal. At last the city is back in the hands of the people. A republic is rising from the ashes of empire. I cannot even condemn the burning of the Tuileries and Palais de Justice. Some have called the fire a tragedy because so many precious historical documents were lost. Yet perhaps this auto-da-fé will be a spur to greater social justice and historical sympathy. (The two go hand-in-hand.) Only when historians are

obliged to work between the documents and fill in the gaps—for there are always gaps—do the imaginative faculties become engaged in storytelling, and only then can we paint the true picture of an age. I say this even though the fire was not without immediate consequence for me. According to the Ministry of Justice, my entire dossier was consumed in the flames. Under the circumstances, a word from you to the minister will do much to advance my pardon.

Remember, we are countrymen. My native Châteaudun borders on your Chartres, though my father was a simple day laborer, not a wealthy merchant like yours. Thanks to the local grandee, I spent a few youthful years at the Sorbonne. But Paris was expensive, and I returned to Châteaudun to work as a clerk and marry a local girl. But I always loved learning. At the local library I devoured the *Défense de M. Libri*, about the scholar who purloined so many French manuscripts and fled to England. It was his *fauteuil* that you occupied in the academy. But I had no thoughts of emulating Libri in those days. I did not set my sights so high. When my wife died in childbirth, I returned to Paris. A local librarian noted on my card, “The hard-working M. Lucas is going to live in Paris. He deserves to succeed.”

But merit and love of scholarship are not enough to get a young man a job in this country. I first tried to find employment at the Bibliothèque Impériale then under construction on the rue de Richelieu. That magnificent new building! Long may it welcome scholars! But they would not offer me a post because I lacked a university degree and couldn't read Latin. Finally, in 1853, I came to the attention of Letellier, keeper of the famous *cabinet* of genealogical documents. The scions of great families came to him for evidence of their ancestors. The past can be lucrative when properly personalized.

For instance, one of my clients—Duprat, by name—greatly desired to count the illustrious Chancellor Duprat among his forefathers. At first, I could find no documents to this effect in Letellier's *cabinet*. But the latter-day Duprat begged, he commanded, he *pleaded* with me to find him some proof. What was I to do? We live in an age of commercial service. In the end, I procured two confirmatory letters for him, written by the great Montaigne himself. Duprat's palms were so sweaty when I handed him these letters that he pulled on a pair of white gloves. The noted antiquarian M. Feuillet de Conches printed them as a remarkable new find in his compendium of illustrious letters, only to assert (rather primly, I thought) that Montaigne's style in these letters was a bit “negligé.”

What conclusion was I to draw? I had just caught my first glimpse of the near infinite possibilities of the past. But I would have remained a mere dabbler, a teller of petty fables, had I not fallen under your influence.

I will be forever grateful to you for having taught me what you had long ago grasped: that there could be no calling more noble than the history of science, that no history was as revelatory of its own age as the history of the human mind staking its claim to possess a universal form of knowledge. Until I met you, I had only cultivated narrow personal histories, thinking that lives, loves, and quixotic adventures best revealed the particularities of an era. Your vision was so much greater. Not only were you one of the premier mathematical minds of our century, you were among the first Frenchmen to see the value in a history of truth. It was your monumental work on the development of geometry that won you election to the academy, your erudition honed by your private collection of scientific books and manuscripts, said to be the finest in France.

To this collection, I added a precious new trove. For seven years I presented myself every week at your study to sell you additional letters culled from the collection of an impoverished scion of an ancient family, forced to sell off his sole remaining asset—his family papers. Among these papers was a cache saved from the Revolutionary conflagration by an improbable sea trip to America and back. (Yet isn't it improbabilities that have the ring of truth?) As I told you, the old man was so insistent upon his anonymity that he threatened to sell the letters to a foreign collector if you publicly disclosed their source. This was a terrible threat, for the letters would surely attract the enmity of those who resented France's scientific past and whispered of her current scientific decline. It would mean the destruction of the letters. And so for five years you kept the secret—until your magnanimity got the better of you.

In July 1867 you and your fellow scientists sat attentively while the orators of your sister Académie Française celebrated the bicentennial of your founding. Well, the *hommes de lettres* didn't have all the letters! The next Monday, 8 July 1867, you offered the Academy of Sciences a gift of two missives penned by Rotrou, the great Renaissance poet, addressed to the all-powerful Cardinal Richelieu. A comparable conversation between mind and might may seem utopian today, but isn't history supposed to instruct as well as entertain? Besides, these letters proved that the plans for a French academy predated the founding of the English and Italian academies. It was a glorious claim of precedence for France. No wonder your colleagues jumped at the hint that you also possessed letters from Pascal that might bring further primacy to France.

Magnanimity is a game played for ever-greater stakes. So at the next meeting, you read them a letter from Pascal to Robert Boyle in which he asserted that attraction is a property of mass operating at a distance via an inverse square law, as well as his notes discussing the movement of massive

bodies under an attractive power, describing the curves tracked by such bodies, identifying this planetary law with the law of falling bodies, and, finally, applying these laws to the best empirical data of the day. In short, documents proving that Pascal, not Newton, had discovered the law of universal gravitation.

What neither of us had anticipated was the ingratitude of the world of scholarship, the petty quibblings of your colleagues and the craven *wie es gewesen Menschen*. At the very next session, one colleague doubted Pascal could possibly have solved the problem of gravitation so thoroughly without access to Newton's calculus. Another denied that Pascal could have supplied those ratios of planetary masses without empirical data that became available only after his death.

When you returned from the academy that day your face was red and the veins in your temples had wormed their way to the surface. Whatever objections your mathematical proofs had encountered, no one before had ever doubted your word. Mathematics is a patient discipline; she can wait for even the most obtuse minds. These letters, however, raised the matter of *credit*, a far more pressing concern.

Having supplied you with those letters in the first place, how could I refuse to help you now? Yet my own knowledge was hardly sufficient. I needed your help. And how generously you gave it! You were the one who spelled out the sort of evidence I should look for in the voluminous holdings of the old man. No detail was beneath you. The proof of authenticity, you said, lies in the coherence of details. You yourself took pen in hand to show me how Pascal signed his name. How he crossed his *ts* and dotted his *is*. And lo and behold, I found you documents to prove that Pascal, towards the end of his life, had communicated his theories directly to Newton. And Newton, as everyone knows, was a notorious pirate of other peoples' work!

You conveyed these documents to the academy—traces of a direct dialogue between the greatest minds of England and France in the greatest age of thought. One would have expected your auditors to be awed. But these letters only prompted further objections. Experts on Pascal wrote in to say that the writing appeared not to be in his own hand. They noted that at Pascal's death Newton was only an eleven-year-old boy. They claimed that Pascal could not have used an analogy of a fly floating in coffee (as he did in one of his letters) twenty years before coffee was drunk in Paris. And they asserted that it would have been Galileo, if anyone, who would have anticipated Newton in his discovery.

Yet for each objection, we found an answer. In the old man's collection I found you new letters written by Anne Ascough, Newton's mother, thank-

ing Pascal for taking an interest in her young son. You demonstrated that coffee had been known in the 1650s. And you provided a correspondence, in which Galileo supplied Pascal (then seventeen years old himself) with empirical data on the planets not yet publicly available.

But rather than silence your critics, your responses only drew further naysayers. English scholars pointed out that Newton's mother never signed her maiden name and no English archive contained traces of any correspondence between French savants and the eleven-year-old Isaac. Italian scholars pointed out that at the date of Galileo's letter, the Pisan astronomer was nearly blind, that his handwriting did not quite resemble the handwriting in the letter—and besides, he never wrote in French.

Yet once again you had both evidence and logic on your side. We were able to find further letters demonstrating that Newton had not only robbed Pascal of his discovery but had systematically destroyed all the correspondence that would have exposed his piracy; that Galileo had glimpsed the law of universal gravitation but hid his knowledge; that his blindness had been feigned; that his letter was a French copy of an Italian original. (True, the Italian letter we presented did not accord with seventeenth-century spelling, but that was because this Italian letter was itself a later copy.)

Your enemies—Le Verrier among them—accused you of monomania or senility. But no one who saw you stand before that august body and work your way through the evidence could doubt you were in full command of your faculties.

At last, on 5 April 1869, the academy awarded you the victory. "The surest guarantee of the authenticity of a document," intoned Permanent Secretary Elie de Beaumont, "is the moral proof evident in reading it." It was a glorious moment: moral proof triumphant at the Academy of Sciences. Yet that very morning an impertinent busybody—a small-time scientist with too much time on his hands—wrote to the academy citing passages from the work of an obscure eighteenth-century naval engineer, passages that matched the text of your first letter from Pascal to Boyle word for word. How would you extricate yourself this time?

I remember your look of desperation when I arrived at your house. Had I found anything relevant in the old man's collection that would answer these new accusations? I had. I had found a series of letters documenting the means by which this obscure eighteenth-century naval engineer had briefly been given access to—and then plagiarized—the unpublished letters of his illustrious seventeenth-century forebears. After all, wasn't it more logical to assume that an eighteenth-century author had copied a seventeenth-century author than the other way around? And who could believe that a genius like Pascal would stoop to stealing the words of an obscure naval engineer?

You possessed that mastery of coherence that only a geometer can boast. How were you to know the coherence had been custom-made? As your beloved Pascal once wrote, “Mathematicians do not reason falsely from principles that they know . . . [but] they do not see what is in front of them.” And what is more coherent than a work of fiction?

And then you betrayed me.

As my lawyer argued, a conviction for forgery depends on proving that the perpetrator deliberately chose stratagems that would have deceived a person exercising due caution. But how can you, my dear Sir, be said to have exercised due caution? If you really believed in the authenticity of the letters I was selling you, why was I selling them to you at the prices I did? Thirty thousand letters for 140,000 francs comes to a mere 5 francs a letter. Hardly a fair price for an original manuscript from the hand of Pascal, Newton, or Galileo. You were an experienced collector. If you believed the letters to be authentic, then you were robbing me and the prosecutor ought to have sent you here in my place! And if you believed they were false, then according to the law I did not commit forgery because you were not deceived. You who are an expert in logic must surely see that I cannot be guilty under either assumption.

I urge these considerations upon you not because I think that you should have repudiated the letters. On the contrary! You were right to embrace them. My letters were *not* forgeries but a kind of truth, a work of verisimilitude. They were extracts of original texts in the form of letters. History is reenactment. I do not even pretend to be the first to claim that Pascal was the first to discover the law of universal gravitation. That honor goes to the great Enlightenment savant Maupertuis, though his claim has since been forgotten. (Admittedly, I cannot put my hands on that text right now; our prison library is very weak in eighteenth-century materials.) In that sense, I am indeed a plagiarist—as is every historian worth reading. There are always precursors. In history as well as science. But if no one paid attention to Maupertuis when he proclaimed Pascal’s precedence, how was I—an autodidact from the provinces—to command the public’s attention? So I transformed boring technical treatises into personal letters; I let the great men of the past speak directly to one another and boast of their discoveries. And I signed their names at the bottom.

What is verisimilitude but a representation that commands our assent despite our skepticism about human deceitfulness? We sit back and enjoy the show, despite our awareness of the theatrical machinery. We acquiesce in the mystification and embrace the simulacrum.

And what is mystification but an inability to grasp that it is human dis-

sembling that makes representation possible, that we live in a world of appearances where people buy and sell goods whose worth depends on the value assigned to them through the theater of verisimilitude?

On 9 September 1869 they arrested me in my apartment in the rue Saint-Georges, where I lived in domestic tranquility with a respectable woman. Apparently you had ordered the imperial police to tail me, not because you suspected me of fraud—no! you believed in my letters right to the end!—but because you feared I might sell them to a foreign dealer. As I told the prosecutor in the courtroom, it was you who was insatiable, “in-sat-i-able”!

For a month the spies had been following me to the café Riche, where I had the apparently blamable habit of enjoying the morning newspapers. My crime, it would seem, was to have aspirations above my station. To dine in a pleasant café instead of a dark bistro. As if those imperial spies didn’t also follow me afterwards to the Bibliothèque Impériale where I was the first to enter and last to leave, researching the history of science for your benefit, then trudging back to my garret to brew my custom-made ink, age my specialty paper, and toil past midnight, producing documents in time to help you make your weekly case to the academy.

The newspaper men loved the story. As consummate plagiarists they slapped together their daily cut-and-paste forgeries, the petty copy work of men without skill in calligraphy, or the time or imagination to invent something out of whole cloth.

That the trial became a farce is not my fault. For that, you must blame the imperial prosecutor. He is the one who decided to read out loud from the *other* letters, the letters that were never meant to be revealed to the vulgar—not even to the academy—letters that had let you eavesdrop on the secret dialogue of genius and power through the ages. And what a magnificent picture they painted.

A letter from Thales to Prince Ambigat of the Gauls, in which the world’s first natural philosopher explained his water theory of matter. A letter from Alexander the Great to Aristotle concerning the philosopher’s impending voyage to Gaul. A letter of Cleopatra to Julius Caesar informing him that their son, Caesarion, would soon be fit to leave for Marseilles. A letter from Mary Magdalene to her brother Lazarus the Resurrected, praising her sojourn in provinces of Gaul. Plus a letter of the Doctor Castor of Gaul to Jesus Christ. “All written,” concluded the prosecutor with a smirk, “in the original French.”

I can still recall your face as the swell of laughter drowned out the prosecutor’s voice. How dare they! How dare those gutter journalists and society ladies laugh at your passionate desire to read the correspondence between Alexander and Aristotle, between Rabelais and Charles V, between the ex-

cellent Doctor Castor and Jesus Christ. Those fools! They lack all historical sympathy. We who love history must not let these bourgeois literalists distract us from reimagining the richness of the past. Who wouldn't wish to know what the good doctor Castor wrote to Christ? And what Christ answered!

The climax of the trial was the report of my old enemies, the handwriting experts. Where would we be without one another? I need their facsimiles to imitate the writings of the famous dead. And they need me to hone their skills—and to justify their jobs. Then, too, many an expert has supplemented his salary by dabbling in forgery—and vice versa. Between us, we define the authentic.

They generously confirmed what the police had dismissed as my extravagant boast: that I alone had forged all 30,000 letters in your possession. But they mocked my work's "industrial" quality. And they wronged me when they burned all but a hundred. That was a crime against history. After all, when the divine Michelangelo pretended to unearth an antique statue—a sculpture he had carved the week before and buried in the ground—did anyone take a sledgehammer to that figure of beauty because it was not "original"? As art is re-creation, so is history. And history has been impoverished by their vandalism. Another auto-da-fé.

Well, I am almost done.

The prison authorities here will undoubtedly scrutinize this letter for multiple meanings. The literary critics are nothing to them. They anticipate every deceitful stratagem, just as I anticipate every method of discovery. I have known all along that they would appraise every character of this letter for signs of criminality or for evidence of reform. How could I forget, when the law on prison censorship is printed along the margin of every page they give me? But I have said nothing here that I would not repeat to a reader the most remote from me in time and sympathy. I have done everything I could to take their objections on board in advance, including the accusation of frivolity. (They must believe I am a serious person, or else they will never let me out of here.)

So the way to read this letter (if I may be so presumptuous) is to look beyond the materiality of ink and paper, set aside all skepticism about the trivial problems of authenticity (as you once were so willing to do), and consider my text for what it purports to be. Does it express a contempt for history or a love of it? Does it exhibit signs of deception or transparency? Is it written in the spirit of revenge or generosity? I can only hope that this letter will be read as a sign of my rehabilitation. If so, then it may fulfill its purpose even if it goes unsent; and if sent, unanswered; and if answered, answered in the negative. So, as it happens, I do not really need your pardon.

The act of writing is itself the constitutive deed. For I might as well acknowledge that they will never permit me to send you this letter. All the prison rules are against it. And, in that sense, I have conjured you up as my correspondent, much as I conjured up 600 other historical figures.

This conjuring, however, does not make you any less vital to me. After all, I conjured up Pascal, Aristotle, and Alexander the Great to give them life, men whose cold ashes had not stirred in many a century. I did so by putting them in touch with one another and hence with their own time—and ours.

And so it was with you. To conjure you up here in my prison cell has been a distraction from my other troubles (which I will not bother you about). In doing so, I played on your credulity. But I also stoked your imagination. I leave it to you to decide which you prefer. In either case, I hope my efforts—our common labor in the history of science—will do as much for you as we did together for Pascal and Galileo, that is, to give you life, who soon will be cold ash. To put you in touch with your own time and with times to come.

Your most obedient servant,

Denis Lucas (a.k.a. Denis Vrain-Lucas, prisoner # 28888)

Epilogue

The subsequent career of Vrain-Lucas may interest the reader. His request for a pardon was denied. Six months after his release from prison in mid-1872, he was condemned to prison again for having conned an aged abbé out of his small fortune plus his entire library. This time he received a three-year sentence. Released in early 1876, he was condemned to prison later that year for having made off with rare texts from the bookstore of Tamin and Wilhem. This time, as a recidivist, he received double the usual sentence: a four-year term. Finally, upon his third release, he was ordered to return to his native Châteaudun and present himself regularly at the town hall. In 1880, at the age of sixty-four, he was selling secondhand books on the streets of Châteaudun. A year later, he died of the dropsy.

Chasles died a year later at the age of eighty-eight. His famous collection of scientific books and manuscripts was sold at auction.³

3. The Chasles affair has been treated in the following secondary sources: Ken Alder, "Michel Chasles, ou l'illusion envoûtante," *Les Cahiers de science et vie* 58 (Aug.–Sept. 2000): 4–11; Alphonse Daudet, *L'Immortel: Moeurs parisiennes* (1881), *Oeuvres*, ed. Roger Ripoll, 3 vols. (Paris, 1986–94), 3:683–849; F. Foiret, "Un Mystificateur fameux, Vrain-Lucas," *Bulletins Société Dunoise* 211 (Apr. 1929): 182–96; Maurice Jusselin, *Les Débuts de Vrain-Lucas à Paris* (Chartres, 1933); Henri Lizier, *La Famille Chasles: Branche cadette* (Epernon, 1993); Jean-Paul Poirier, *Mystification à l'Académie des Sciences* (Paris, 2001); and Jean Pelseneer, "Quetelet, Chasles, et les faux Vrain-Lucas, d'après les lettres inédites," *Congrès national des sciences, comptes-rendus*, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1935), 1:105–12.

For their epitaph I supply this quote from a young man who turned twenty-seven that year. In his essay “The Decay of Lying” Oscar Wilde wrote: “After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence. If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once.”⁴

4. Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying: An Observation” (1889), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. J. B. Foreman (London, 1948), p. 971.