

Collection, conviction, and contemplation; or, Picturing coins in early modern books, ca. 1550-1700

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Preliminary reflections

Of the many stories in Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, one, in particular, escapes all but the most meticulous reader. The story of Sutpen's Hundred and Yoknapatawpha County is narrated by the young Quentin Compson, on a cold New England night in 1910, to Compson's roommate at Harvard College. The text ends with the roommate's question, "Why do you hate the South?," to which Compson replies, frantically, in thought and word, "*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" The text ends there. But the key to the deep story is found in the "Genealogy" that follows: "Quentin Compson. Grandson of Thomas Sutpen's first Yoknapatawpha County friend. Born, Jefferson, 1891. Attended Harvard, 1909-1910. Died, Cambridge, Mass., 1910." Compson was so caught up telling his story that he caught his death "in the cold air, the iron New England dark."¹ The past is not dead; it is not even past—and it can kill the living.²

¹ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, in *Novels 1936-1940* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 311, 315.

² Cf. Faulkner's oft-quoted line in "Requiem for a Nun": "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

In a culture based so intensely on the past, whether it be the South of the Lost Cause or the culture of Renaissance humanism, with its hypostatization of an idealized antiquity, the past is ever present. But it is a present absence, characterized by a loss and longing that can be quietly elegiac or excruciatingly painful, a gaping wound in consciousness. Petrarch's letters to classical authors, in turns fawning and censorious, epitomize this complex relationship to the imagined past. Nearly two centuries later, Erasmus would mock the Italian Ciceronians (themselves, in good measure, creatures of his own imagination), insisting that the "Cicero" whom they idolized was the pale shadow of the man himself, cast by the fragments of his *oeuvre* that had survived. Erasmus himself, though, created his own imaginary scholarly hero in the person of St. Jerome, the scholar-saint whose collected works and letters Erasmus edited.³

There is nothing unique about the postbellum South's or the European Renaissance's engagement with the past; a culture that does not draw upon what has gone before as a source of legitimation and inspiration is unthinkable.⁴ But the Renaissance engagement with the past, located at the origins of modern historicist thought, is unusual, for Renaissance humanists—like the Greek historians whose works they recovered and translated—approached the past not only reverently but also critically.⁵ Humanists were

³ See Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus: Man of letters*, and Eugene F. Rice, Jr., *St. Jerome in the Renaissance*.

⁴ See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality*.

⁵ The literature on these subjects is vast; I indicate some starting points. On ancient Greece: M. I. Finley, "Myth, memory and history," in *The use and abuse of history*; Charles William Fornara, *The nature of history in ancient Greece and Rome*; Arnaldo Momigliano, *The classical foundations of modern historiography*. On the Renaissance: Peter Burke, *The Renaissance sense of the past*; Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of modern historical method*; George Huppert, *The idea of perfect history*; Thomas Greene, *The light in Troy*; Ulrich Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung*. On the mythic vs. historical view of the past, see Finley, "Myth,

myth-makers, of course; they created an ideal version of antiquity and measured themselves against it—whether confidently or despairingly. But they were also myth-breakers; the first humanist histories of northern Europe dispelled confidently the old medieval myths of Trojan origins, even if they sometimes did substitute new and improved myths based on suitably impressive documentary sources, like those obligingly forged by Giovanni Nanni of Viterbo.⁶ What matters in the present context is that their myths *did* need to be buttressed by historical sources, even if those sources could be bought, made to order, in a dark alley on the literary black market.

But literary sources were suspect. Lorenzo Valla had shown how to tear apart an obvious forgery like the Donation of Constantine; by the late seventeenth century, the numismatist Père Hardouin could claim that almost all of classical Latin literature, apart from Pliny the Elder's *Natural history* and Vergil's *Georgics*, had been forged by a gang of Italians in the fourteenth century.⁷ Sometimes skeptical of the truth of literary sources, sometimes looking to go beyond them, humanists from the fourteenth century collected coins, statues, inscriptions, and other physical remains of antiquity as guarantors of the truth of their view of the past.

Such objects guaranteed much more than truth, however. Talismans, they ensured a direct connection to the past that literary texts could not provide—apart from the occasional remnant, such as the Florentine codex of Justinian's *Digest*, that were believed to date from antiquity itself. Philology, already sophisticated by the end of the fifteenth century, could

memory and history"; Mircea Eliade, *The myth of the eternal return*; and Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An interpretation*, vol. 2. My understanding of many issues related to history and memory has been deepened by perusing Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*.

⁶ Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the text*; *idem*, *Forgers and critics*.

demonstrate that most manuscripts, even the “vetustissimi” mentioned by critics like Poliziano and Barbaro, were copies of copies, if not worse. Aficionados of antiquity who wanted a direct connection with the vanished past could do no better than to seek its remnants: buildings and ruins, inscriptions, statues, and, above all, coins.⁸

It is this affective weight placed on remnants of the classical past that explains the reaction of the Cardinal San Giorgio, who bought a statue of a sleeping Cupid, believing it to be ancient; when he discovered that it was really by a young Florentine sculptor named Buonarroti, he angrily demanded his money back. Giorgio Vasari, who tells several versions of the story, reproaches the Cardinal for his narrow-mindedness: what matters, said Vasari, was not the statue’s age but its perfection.⁹ From an esthetic standpoint he was certainly right—though esthetics was just beginning its long emancipation from ethics and epistemology.¹⁰ But for the buyer, losing an antique talisman must have been quite a blow—even if he did get a Michelangelo in return.

A century after Vasari recorded that story, Ezechiel Spanheim could still emphasize the talismanic power of antiquity in defending the dignity of numismatics:

[S]i Rudera tamen varia; Columnae; Statuae; Lapides; Urnae; Paterae; Fibulae; Lampades; Simpula; Annuli, Tesserae; aliaque veteris Romanorum vel Elegantiae, vel Supellectilis monumenta commendationem adhuc habent, *quid de Nummis statuendum*

⁷ On Père Hardouin, see Arnaldo Momigliano, “Ancient history and the antiquarian.”

⁸ The point is also made, in somewhat different terms, by Francis Haskell, *History and its images*, 20.

⁹ Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the artists* (Oxford World Classics), life of Michelangelo, 423.

¹⁰ On Renaissance esthetics, see David Summers, *The judgment of sense*, and Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the past*. The complex interplay between ethics, esthetics, and epistemology is at the center of the research project of which this paper is a preliminary, fragmentary sketch.

*sit, in quibus non muta illa ferme aut mortua, sed spirans adhuc quasi, & rediviva universa sese offert Antiquitas, facile per se quisquis potest arbitrari.*¹¹

[If diverse fragments, columns, statues, stones, urns, dishes, brooches, torches, ladles, rings, tiles, and other monuments of old Roman art or craft are still considered excellent, *it is clear what we should concluded about coins, in which all Antiquity appears not mute or dead, but as if it were still breathing and restored to life.*

Other fragments of antiquity might be mute and dead, but coins, at least, could breathe—and, Spanheim implied, speak. At least they could be easily spoken for, more easily than columns, statues, ladles, and tiles.¹² In the pages that follow I offer a few reflections on how early modern numismatists made coins speak, and what they thought they heard them say.

The uses of coins in the sixteenth century¹³

Antonio Agustín was a Counter-Reformation archbishop (of Tarragona, in Valencia), one of the Tridentine Fathers, and an expert in civil and canon law. He was also a philologist of sorts, having edited and commented on the text of Justinian’s digest.¹⁴ How did this learned, energetic prelate relax in the evenings? If we are to believe his dialogue on the use of ancient coins, he did so by instructing his nephew on the use and pleasure to be

¹¹ Spanheim, *Dissertatio de praestantia et usu numismatum antiquorum* (1664), 6, my emphasis.

¹² Barkan, *Unearthing the past*, offers a delicious account of the trouble that early sixteenth-century artists encountered when trying to square the “late imperial schlock” they dug up in Rome with the accounts of Hellenic and Hellenistic masterpieces in Pliny’s *Natural history*. On speaking for mute objects, see the work of Bruno Latour, especially *Science in action*.

¹³ For an excellent introduction to Renaissance numismatics, see John Cunnally, *Images of the illustrious*.

¹⁴ On Agustín, see Michael Crawford, ed., *Antonio Agustín between Renaissance and Counter-Reform*.

drawn from contemplating these tiny relics of antiquity.¹⁵ We should beware of taking the idealized setting and content of a humanist dialogue as an unvarnished description of historical reality. Rather, Agustín’s dialogue reveals an ideal of profitable leisure, an ideal inculcated by generations of humanist pedagogues, from Gasparo Barzizza to Juan Luis Vives, who conceded that their pupils needed to relax but abhorred wasting time.

What made the study, contemplation, and discussion of ancient coins more than a waste of time?—more than hunting flies with an iron stylus, one of the emperor Domitian’s favorite pastimes, as Pier Paolo Vergerio told his students in the hope that they, suitably horrified, would find better ways to amuse themselves.¹⁶ Agustín enumerated several reasons for collecting and examining ancient coins. First, they are useful models for artists and coin designers. Second, the study of coins teaches us the images of kings, emperors, commanders [*duces*], and of other famous men in civil and military life: “Nec est, credo, ab omni humanitate quisquam tam alienus, quem non Regis, vel parentis, vel amici imago delectet.” They even teach us about natural history by showing the forms of crocodiles and other exotic beasts (real and fanciful). Third, coins show us celebrated provinces, cities, rivers, sacred and private houses and their parts, arches, forums, villas, roads, gates, and the like. Fourth, coins represent the virtues in concrete form. Fifth, they teach “those who are curious about antiquity” [*Antiquitatis curiosi*] about the nuts and bolts of ancient life: priestly

¹⁵ Antonio Agustín, *Dialogos de medallas inscripciones y otras antiguedades* (Tarragona: Mey, 1587). The dialogue was published in Italian translation in 1592; my references are to the 1617 Latin edition, translated, edited, and expanded with a twelfth dialogue and a bibliography by Andreas Schott.

¹⁶ Pier Paolo Vergerio, *De ingenuis moribus*, in *Humanist educational treatises*, ed. Craig Kallendorf, 40-43. One of my tenth-grade English classmates must have taken a page from Domitian’s book.

implements, the arms of war, various forms of dress, and the like. Finally, they show us ancient orthography more faithfully than any manuscript.¹⁷

Agustín’s list exemplifies the Renaissance commonplace of the Horatian *utile dulci*. In his *Ars poetica* (or *Epistula ad Pisones*), Horace had praised the poet “qui miscuit utile dulci,/lectorem delectando pariterque monendo.”¹⁸ However effective humanist pedagogues were at making their charges into upright, moral individuals,¹⁹ they at least seem to have driven home the lesson that pleasures were guilty unless they were also edifying; hence the constant repetition of Horace’s catch-phrase along with the assertion that whatever a writer had produced would not only delight his readers but also instruct them. Agustín, as I have noted, was no exception. But that should not lead us to discount his claims for the utility of ancient coins. Rather, a close look at those claims reveals what this sixteenth-century prelate and his contemporaries meant by “utility”—what value they attributed to their serious pastimes.

Some of Agustín’s uses involved learning more about the ancient world or verifying claims to understand it. Coins contribute to knowledge of natural history, geography, and daily life, and to understanding the ancients’ orthography. They show us what consuls, kings, and emperors looked like. As Agustín’s choice of words implies, they satisfy curiosity about the ancient world. But they do more: they serve as a basis for contemplation and imitation. Artists study coins in order to produce art; moral individuals study them in order to act virtuously. Images of the illustrious should act as spurs to imitate their great and virtuous

¹⁷ Agustín, *Dialogi*, 7-9.

¹⁸ Horace, *Opera*, ed. Wickham, rev. Garrod, 264 (*Ars poetica* 343-344).

¹⁹ Grafton and Jardine, *From humanism to the humanities*.

acts; images of the infamous served as warnings against vice; personifications of the virtues, properly contemplated, would impress the precise meaning of virtue in the mind of the contemplator, making him more likely to behave in congruity with them.²⁰

Though collecting coins could be an end in itself, ideally, in Agustín's view, it should serve as a basis for conviction and contemplation: for proving claims about the ancient world and for imitation of the ancients, especially moral and esthetic imitation. These uses—conviction and contemplation—were themselves seen by contemporaries as two sides of the same coin. The Venetian collector Sebastiano Erizzo, writing shortly before Agustín, saw the goal of history as teaching how to govern and how to live morally; the physical remains of antiquity, especially coins and medals, were instantiations of this history, hence warrants for its truth.²¹ As a physical symbol, the coin pointed to a past that was otherwise uncapturable. But coins were also a symbol in the sixteenth-century sense: an iconographical representation that conveyed an allegorical or a moral sense.²² To use a coin, one had to interpret it properly. For the mainstream of sixteenth and seventeenth-century numismatics, the task of interpretation led away from the coin as physical object to the coin as representation, as inscription and iconography. If the artist, in Agustín's schema, had an interest in the coin as physical object, in the techniques that ancient sculptors and mint masters employed to produce such small yet exquisite objects, other contemplators were

²⁰ It is worth bearing in mind that sixteenth-century ethical theory presumed that moral standards were legislated and that the moral individual was moral insofar as he conformed to those standards. See J. B. Schneewind, *The invention of autonomy*, for an account of the transformation of ethical theory from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century.

²¹ Erizzo, *Discorso sopra le medaglie degli antichi* (1568; first published 1559), 1-3.

drawn toward the image, toward the iconography of virtue, the portraits of emperors, the representations of clothing and instruments. The physicality of coins assured their talismanic power, but the intellect, in contemplating them, was drawn to a higher plane, conducted by the noble metal on which the representations were impressed. Erizzo and other antiquarians were so concerned with the nobility of coins and their iconography, and so distressed at the thought that they might have been traded for cattle or corn, that they insisted that the “medals” issued by Roman emperors had never actually served as money.²³

Early modern antiquarians were aware of this distinction between the coin as object of exchange and its iconography as part of a symbolic system. At the very least they recognized that the literature of numismatics could be divided into two broad groups. Andreas Schott, who translated Agustín’s dialogues into Latin and published them in 1617 with an additional dialogue of his own, added an annotated bibliography to the work. Entitled “qui de numismatis scripserint et icones exhibuerint,” this bibliography explicitly excluded the many writers “qui de re Nummaria scripserunt.”²⁴ The latter category would have included the scholars who considered coins as physical objects, who weighed them to determine their values and proportions, who examined ancient minting practices and rates of exchange: in short, the intellectual heirs of Guillaume Budé, whose *De asse et partibus eius* set a

²² On symbols and emblems in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture, fundamental works include Mario Praz, *Studies in seventeenth-century imagery*, Don Cameron Allen, *Mysteriously meant*, Henkel and Schone, *Emblemata*.

²³ Erizzo and Enea Vico carried on a veiled polemic on this subject; cf. Vico, *Discorsi sopra le medaglie degli antichi* (1555).

²⁴ Schott, bibliography, in Agustín, *Dialogi*.

high standard for the study of ancient money, weights, and measures.²⁵ Schott's bibliography emphasized instead the symbolic approach to coins: an approach characterized by "writing about coins and displaying their images." In these works, antiquity was literally illustrated with woodcuts or copperplate engravings of coins that, for all intents and purposes, substituted for the objects themselves.

Illustrations of coins in Renaissance books

What did Andreas Schott mean by "writing about coins and displaying their images"? His bibliography lists forty-two books; three, he noted, lacked figures. Schott expected books about coins to be illustrated. Nineteen of the forty-two books explicitly mentioned imperial coinage, either obverses, reverses, or both. Since many of the others drew heavily on imperial coinage (for instance, the *Discours de la religion des anciens Romains* by Guillaume du Choul, which we will consider below at more length), the typical numismatic book that Schott had in mind was an illustrated study of Roman imperial coinage. There were other kinds of books, but they were the exception to the rule.

Within that general type, however, there was a lot of variation. Engravers like Enea Vico and Hubertus Goltzius emphasized the pictures, reproducing obverses and reverses along with brief biographical sketches of the emperors and their families who were depicted on them. Many such books aspired to form a virtual cabinet, including as complete as possible a series of coins. Among the most ambitious, published just before Schott's translation of Agustín, was Jacob Biaeus's *Imp. Rom. Numismata aurea*, from Julius Caesar to

²⁵ Roberto Weiss, *The Renaissance discovery of classical antiquity*, considers Budé's work to be the most important antiquarian treatise of the first quarter of the sixteenth century. For a more

Heraclius, published in 1615; the 1617 edition, published along with the Agustín translation, added silver and bronze coins. The numismatist who bought one of these books could see what his own collection lacked and, possibly, track down and acquire the coins he needed to complete a series.

Other books on Roman imperial coinage were written not by engravers but by scholars, antiquarians who drew upon coins to recreate different aspects of the ancient world. More than series of imperial coinage, such books reveal how Renaissance antiquarians interpreted their metallic talismans. I intend to spend the next several years examining this process in detail. For the moment I would like to briefly discuss one example: the *Discours de la religion des anciens Romains, Escript par Noble Seigneur Guillaume du Choul, Conseiller du Roy, & Bailly des montaignes du Daulphiné, et Illustré d'un grand nombre de medailles, & de plusieurs belles figures retirées des marbres antiques, qui se treuvent à Rome, & par nostre Gaule.*^{26*}

The majority of Guillaume du Choul's work on Roman antiquities has been lost; of the twelve volumes he wrote (or claimed to have written), only one manuscript volume survives.²⁷ But the volumes he published on Roman religion and on Roman military camps were enough to ensure his reputation. Agustín observed of Du Choul that he wrote “in French, but with learning” on the subjects, a judgment echoed by Schott and later critics. Du

measured judgment, see Richard Cooper, “Collectors of coins and numismatic scholarship in early Renaissance France,” in Crawford et al., eds., *Medals and coins from Budé to Mommsen*.

²⁶ On Du Choul and his *Discours*, see the mediocre article by Félix Bourriot; Francis Haskell, *History and its images*, esp. pp. 16-17; Margaret Daly Davis, *Archäologie der Antike*, 100-101.

* *Discourse on the religion of the ancient Romans, written by the noble lord Guillaume du Choul, royal counselor and bailiff of the mountains of the Dauphiné, and illustrated by a large number of medals and by several beautiful figures drawn from ancient marbles that are found in Rome and in our Gaul.*

Choul's book on the religion of the Romans begins with the temples, images, and attributes of the gods, including personifications such as Pax; then describes the colleges of priests, their insignia, clothing, and accoutrements; and finally discusses the sacrificial practices of the Romans. Throughout the book, Du Choul refers to ancient coins, and occasionally to marble reliefs, as evidence; the book itself contains hundreds of woodcut illustrations of the objects to which the text refers.

Du Choul went to pains to ensure that his book provided a true survey of Roman religion, as he understood it, including all the major gods and goddesses. Yet at the same time, the book was a monument to Du Choul's coin collection and, to a lesser extent, to his contacts in the world of antiquarians. "I would not have imagined immortalizing Antinous," he informed his readers, "had I not found three medallions that Hadrian had struck to preserve his memory.... Because I have this medal of Antinous, on the reverse of which is represented the temple that Hadrian had built in his honor on the Nile, I did not want to defraud the studious reader and lover of antiquity of seeing this beautiful edifice."²⁸

Elsewhere in the book Du Choul refers to objects that had been shown to him by fellow antiquarians, like the temple of Janus Quadrifrons, "drawn from the medal of Augustus that was given to me by the antiquary Sig. Jacomo [*sic*] Strada of Mantua, a diligent scrutator of antiquity."²⁹ In many instances, Du Choul does not indicate the provenance of the medals he describes and reproduces, but even in such instances, passing remarks imply that he has

²⁷ Cooper, "Collectors of coins," discusses this MS., which is now in Turin; see also Haskell, *History*, 16-17. Haskell reproduces a miniature from the MS. showing Du Choul presenting the volume to François I.

²⁸ Du Choul, *Discours*, 211.

examined them himself at first hand. Describing a medal of Alexander whose reverse shows Jupiter enthroned among the signs of the Zodiac, Du Choul noted that he has said nothing of the inscription, “which is so worn that I have not been able to make any sense of it.”³⁰ Elsewhere he describes medals that he has not seen himself, carefully recording where he encountered the description.³¹

Whether offhand or carefully calculated—and Du Choul’s naïve style implies the former—such remarks serve as warrants for Du Choul’s conclusions. Sixteenth-century antiquaries knew very well that a skillful forger could produce fakes that could be detected only by an equally skilled antiquary. Vico and Agustín discussed the problem, concluding that only experience could teach how to uncover frauds.³² Du Choul both claimed and implied that he was experienced in handling ancient coins. While historical Pyrrhonism, with its distrust of literary sources and concomitant valuation (and evaluation) of physical sources, still lay in the future, readers may still have felt reassured that they were being instructed by a writer who usually had firsthand knowledge of the objects he described and adduced as evidence. Du Choul’s careful descriptions, detailed woodcuts, and occasional remarks on provenance, along with occasional general remarks about his “veneration” for antiquity as

²⁹ Du Choul, *Discours*, 20; Du Choul goes on to praise Strada’s book on the emperors and consuls.

³⁰ Du Choul, *Discours*, 54; the woodcut on 55, however, has an apparently nonsensical inscription.

³¹ E.g. Du Choul, *Discours*, 212, referring to a silver medal of Antinous that was described in Leonicus’s *Historiae variae*.

³² Vico, *Discorsi*, 61-63; Agustín, *Dialogi*, 159-160.

well as his desire to understand it,³³ conveyed the ethos of the Renaissance antiquarian: learned, experienced, gifted with an eye for detail and a fine memory—and passionately engaged with his exalted subject.³⁴

This ethos, in sum, warranted that the illustrations in Du Choul’s book were accurate reproductions of the objects they purported to represent. Accuracy, of course, is a relative term; as William Ivins has observed, the invention of photography radically transformed our judgments of how accurately graphic techniques reproduced images.³⁵ Moreover, woodcut and engraving depend on conventions for representing depth and other aspects of the three-dimensional world in two dimensions; other conventions were developed in specific domains such as botanical illustration.³⁶ One particular choice that Du Choul, his illustrator, or his publisher made for the *Discours* could not fail to strike an observer who had any experience with ancient coins: most of the woodcuts were significantly larger than the coins they purported to illustrate. This enlargement was imposed by the technical limits of woodcut: even on the hardest box, sculptors could not achieve the fine lines permitted by copperplate engraving.³⁷ Woodcut and copperplate processes were also further removed

³³ Du Choul, *Discours*, 66: “Entre les pierres gravées, que je garde pour la veneration de l’Antiquité...” [orthography modernized].

³⁴ See Peter Miller, *Peiresc’s Europe: Learning and virtue in the seventeenth century*.

³⁵ William M. Ivins, Jr., *Prints and visual communication*.

³⁶ I discuss the conventions of Renaissance botanical woodcuts and engravings in two forthcoming works: “Image and text in natural history, 1500-1700,” in *The emergence of the scientific image*, ed. Wolfgang Lefèvre et al., and *The science of describing: Natural history in Renaissance Europe, 1490-1620*. See also the comments of L. C. Treviranus, *Die Anwendung des Holzschnittes zur bildlichen Darstellung von Pflanzen*.

³⁷ Wood engraving could achieve much more detail than woodcut, but the technique was not developed until the late eighteenth century: William M. Ivins, Jr., *How prints look*, 28.

from the original than a simple drawing; the paper museums of Ulisse Aldrovandi, Cassiano dal Pozzo, and Nicolas Claude Fabri de Peiresc (to name a few) contained drawings with far more detail than all but the finest graphic reproductions. The ethos of the antiquarian author helped compensate for these inevitable failures of *mimesis*, convincing—ideally, at least—the reader to suspend disbelief, to accept that the impression of block or plate on paper really did represent the metal talisman that the author had examined and on which he based his judgments.

Numismatics in the seventeenth century

But of course the ethos was a rhetorical concept; for every paragon of scholarly virtue—in the sixteenth century, Carolus Clusius, in the seventeenth, Peiresc—there were many whose literary ethos was belied by their private behavior. A scholar whose words implied that he could be trusted implicitly might, in fact, be careless. He might even be lying through his teeth. In the seventeenth century, writers would deliberately play with this possibility, creating the modern genre of the novel.³⁸ Unfortunately for antiquarians, some scholars would also play with the ethos of the careful scholar whose judgments were based on meticulous research. A case in point is the metallic “history” of France produced in the 1630s by Jacques de Bie. De Bie wanted to do for the French monarchy what sixteenth-century antiquarians had done for the Roman emperors: produce a series of metallic portraits and reverses that would illustrate the kings of France, from Charlemagne to the

³⁸ Michael McKeon, *The origins of the English novel, 1640-1700*; Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicius* are examples of the type.

present, and their noble deeds.³⁹ Faced with a distinct lack of such medals, especially for the Carolingians and early Capetians, De Bie made them up, covering up his inventions (not entirely successfully) by emphasizing the research he had conducted to find them. De Bie’s text told one story, but his engravings sometimes told another: he was honest enough to include the real source of a picture (for instance, a tomb completed centuries after its occupant’s inhumation) while portraying it in the form of a medal.

Such inventions may have continued a tradition of playful fraud or sincere re-invention that can be traced back to Pirro Ligorio and other sixteenth-century antiquaries; Mark Jones observes that Peiresc objected not to De Bie’s inventions *per se* but to their anachronisms.⁴⁰ By the late seventeenth century, faced with the crisis of historical Pyrrhonism and equipped with far more learning than their sixteenth-century predecessors, antiquarians looked doubtfully on such mingling of fact and fiction. In fact the antiquarians of the late seventeenth century—the severe *érudits* whom the *philosophes* would publicly scorn and privately plunder—wrote censoriously about their humanist forebears in general. In the preface to his *Thesaurus antiquitatum Romanarum*, J. G. Graevius identified the middle of the sixteenth century as the beginning of serious antiquarianism:

Itali principes fuerunt, qui a renatis litteris aditum quasi aperuerunt ut ad ceterarum optimarum artium, sic & ad huius doctrinae intelligentiam. Inter eos tres eminuerunt praecipue, fere aequales, Paullus Manutius, Carolus Sigonius, Onuphrius Panvinus. Nam qui ante hos in hac ornanda Sparta desudarunt, Blondus Flavius, Raphael Volaterranus, Julius Poponius Laetus, aliique nonnulli, non inutilem quidem, ut illis temporibus, rei Romanae studiosis navarunt operam, & probabile est eorum studium & egregia voluntas bene de Romana & litteraria re merendi; sed nondum satis politi

³⁹ The rest of this paragraph is based on Mark Jones, “‘Proof stones of history’: The status of medals as historical evidence in seventeenth-century France,” in *Medals and coins from Budé to Mommsen*, ed. M. H. Crawford, C. R. Ligota, and J. B. Trapp (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1990), 53-72.

⁴⁰ Jones, “Proof stones of history,” 56-57.

erant, nec ea doctrinae copia, nec iis subsidiis instructi, quae hoc genus scribendi postulabat.⁴¹

Ezechiel Spanheim made a similar but more precise observation about the study of coins: until recently, wrote Spanheim in 1683, most “médaillistes” were not scholars, and most scholars were not numismatists. “Mais disons à la gloire de nôtre Siécle, que les Sçavans commence à devenir Médaillistes, & les Médaillistes à devenir Sçavans.”⁴² Spanheim excepted a few sixteenth-century scholars from this generalization: among them, Antonio Agustín.⁴³ Nonetheless, Spanheim, Graevius, Jacob Spon, and the other erudite antiquarians of the grand siècle had a sense that they were living in a brave new world of scholarship. In the remaining pages I would like to examine some aspects of that world, concentrating on one of its most illustrious, if now neglected, figures.

Ezechiel Spanheim: studying collections

Ezechiel Spanheim was a giant of seventeenth-century erudition. He was a rough contemporary of Leibniz and Locke, and mentioned by contemporaries in the same breath, yet unlike them he has fallen into oblivion (participants in this colloquium, surely, form an exception!). The last biography of Spanheim was a brief account (150 pages) published in 1924.⁴⁴ Historians of France know him for his *Relation de la cour en 1690*, a view of Versailles

⁴¹ Graevius, *Thesaurus antiquitatum Romanarum* (1732-37), vol. 1, sig. a1v.

⁴² Spanheim, *Les Césars de l'empereur Julien* (1683), sig. ïï2r.

⁴³ Spanheim, *De praestantia et usu* (1664), 21.

⁴⁴ Victor Loewe, *Ein Diplomat und Gelehrter: Ezechiel Spanheim, 1629-1710, mit Anhang: Aus dem Briefwechsel zwischen Spanheim und Leibniz* (Berlin, 1924).

from the standpoint of the seasoned diplomat and Calvinist moralist.⁴⁵ But few know more about Spanheim's life, career, or interests than can be gleaned from the introductions to the different editions of his *Relation*. Even recent historians of the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns have avoided Spanheim. Perhaps aficionados of impolite learning and the battles of the books find him too pacific; aside from a critical letter on Richard Simon's *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, Spanheim participated only indirectly in the literary polemics of the late seventeenth century.⁴⁶ Or perhaps they are daunted by his learning. If so, they would only be echoing the judgment of his contemporaries. In January 1693, writing to Spanheim, Leibniz noted, "En effect tout le monde reconnoist que vous regnés souverainement dans la belle erudition, et vostre sentiment vaut au arrest."⁴⁷

Spanheim's life had every possibility to become dull and doctrinaire, a prefiguration of Walter Scott's *Antiquary*. Born in 1629 in Geneva, son of a stern Calvinist theologian, Spanheim grew up there and in Leiden, where his father was called in 1642 to take up a chair of theology. His first publication was a short work on the Hebrew alphabet; as a young man, he also wrote two discourses on the cradle and the cross of Jesus Christ. After Leiden, Spanheim taught at Geneva, then entered the service of Karl Ludwig, Elector Palatinate, as tutor to the Elector's son and heir Karl. In 1661 he was sent to Italy as an ambassador, beginning a diplomatic career that would occupy him, with brief interruptions, until his death

⁴⁵ (Note editions.)

⁴⁶ Spanheim appears around the edges of Joseph Levine's account of the *Battle of the Books*, as an example of the severe continental scholarship to which most Englishmen, apart from Bentley, could only aspire (if they wanted to).

⁴⁷ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to Ezechiele Spanheim, January 1693, in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Allgemeiner politischer und historischer Briefwechsel*, vol. 9 (1693), 2nd ed. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1992), 264-265.

in London in 1710 (he is buried in Westminster Abbey), first in the service of the Rhine Palatinate and then, from the late 1670s, in that of the Electors of Brandenburg and the King of Prussia.

That this career did not deaden Spanheim's spirit says much for the man. Glimpses of his youthful personality are hard to trace in the documentary evidence (so far as I have had a chance to examine it), yet for whatever reason—his French mother, his studies with Saumaise and Heinsius at Leiden, his friendship with his first master's sister, Duchess Sophie of Osnabrück—he kept a sense of humor and proportion. In Rome he mocked the pretensions of the baroque papacy in a bit of doggerel:

Qui seroit si peu raisonnable,
De n'avouër pas de bon cœur,
Qu'assurément pour un pêcheur
La demeure est assez passable⁴⁸
Que sa barque n'est plus cette barque chétive,
Seule, misérable, craintive,
Qui demeurant près de la rive,
N'osoit voguer en pleine mer⁴⁸
Mais qu'à présent qu'elle brave l'orage,
Qu'au travers des écueils, sans crainte de naufrage,
Des esclaves la tirent à force de ramer,
Que ses filets dorez, sa charge glorieuse,
Et le timon en bonne main
Font une pêche plus heureuse
Près du Tibre, que du Jourdain⁴⁸

[Whose judgment could be so debased
To not confess, with honest heart,
That for a fisher, of humble art,
The house is in the best of taste?
That his boat is no longer that vessel frail,
Lonely, miserable, of no avail,
Which near the shore alone could sail,
And durst not venture out to sea;
But that now it can brave the fiercest gale,
That in the cruelest of reefs its hull cannot fail,

⁴⁸ Quoted in Loewe, *Diplomat und Gelehrter*, 21 n. 20. My translation.

For its oars are drawn by the strongest slaves.
 With its netting of gold, its glorious freight
 And at its helm a man of rank,
 It draws in a catch of much greater weight
 By the Tiber's shores, than Jordan's bank?]

On the journey back from Rome to Heidelberg, though, Spanheim entertained Duchess Sophie by reading to her from Rabelais. Throughout his life Spanheim would manage to balance his firm commitment to the Reformed Religion with his ethos as a careful scholar. In 1685, as plenipotentiary minister to France, he hid Huguenot refugees in his *hôtel particulier* in Paris and stonewalled when the king's ministers inquired about them, but he also maintained cordial relations with French Catholic antiquaries—including the king's confessor, Père Lachaise. I hope to argue elsewhere that Spanheim's cultivation of the scholarly ethos contributed to his diplomatic success. At the very least, his life and career suggest that the combination of learning and virtue that characterized Peiresc's art of living could still be achieved at the end of the seventeenth century.⁴⁹

In 1666, at Sophie's request (so he claimed in his dedication), Spanheim published a translation of the *Caesars*, a Lucianic dialogue of the dead written by Julian the Apostate. A strange choice, perhaps, for a Calvinist scholar-diplomat, this satirical work by an infamous anti-Christian mocker (also author, Spanheim noted in a later edition, of a *Misopogon* that mocked the Antiochenes who took offense at his full philosopher's beard). But not so strange for the lover of Rabelais. And the *Césars de l'empereur Julien*, as Spanheim's 1683 edition and commentary show, could be turned to a serious purpose. A funhouse mirror of princes, in which the Roman emperors from Julius Caesar to Constantine were convoked by the gods and either seated at a banquet or expelled to face punishment, all the while subject

to Silenus’s mocking asides, the *Césars de Julien* offered a semi-covert critique of the excesses of absolutism, while at the same time demanding all the resources of Spanheim’s erudition for an accurate translation and an exhaustive commentary.⁵⁰ Perhaps this was one way Spanheim coped with the tension of having been raised in Calvinist republics while spending his life largely in the service of, and at the courts of, absolutist princes.

These scholarly and political goals may have come later. In the waning years of the 1660s, Spanheim turned his scholarly energy to revising and expanding his pathbreaking 1664 *Dissertatio de praestantia et usu numismatum antiquorum*, whose second edition appeared in 1671. (A third edition would appear in two volumes, one posthumous, in 1706 and 1717.) By the late 1670s, though, Spanheim must have been working on a revision to his *Césars*. In 1680 he was sent by the Great Elector to Paris and Versailles, where he quickly joined the antiquarian circle surrounding the duc d’Aumont and made the acquaintance of M. Carcavi, intendant of the Cabinet du Roi.⁵¹ Both would prove invaluable to him. The meetings at the hôtel d’Aumont, on the right bank just upstream from the Isle St.-Louis, were devoted to investigating and discussing the history of the Roman emperors in their medals, while the Cabinet du Roi included one of the largest collections of Roman coins in the world. Both of these institutions would leave their mark on the second edition of the *Césars*, which appeared from the presses of Denys Thierry in April 1683.

⁴⁹ Miller, *Peiresc’s Europe*. My reflections on the art of living have been immensely stimulated by Alexander Nehamas, *The art of living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault*.

⁵⁰ After the convocation (which also includes Alexander the Great, at Hercules’s insistence), the gods decide to have a rhetorical competition among Alexander, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, and Constantine to determine which is the greatest emperor. Marcus Aurelius wins.

⁵¹ Spanheim, *Les Césars de l’empereur Julien* (1683), sig. ñ2r-v.

The first edition of the *Césars* was a small duodecimo of fewer than 150 pages. The second edition was a heavy quarto containing sixty-two pages of prefatory matter (including a learned disquisition on the difference between Greek satyr-plays, Latin satire, and other kinds of ancient mockery), 317 pages of text and commentary, and an additional 173 pages of proofs. As its title-page announced, it contained Julian's *Caesars* "with remarks and proofs illustrated by medals and other ancient monuments." A typical page contains three or four lines of Julian's text; the rest of the page is occupied by Spanheim's two-column commentary. To restrict the commentary to the essential, Spanheim wrote, he moved the proofs of many of his remarks to the back. Apparently Spanheim assumed that the typical reader of his book would need an encyclopedic commentary to extract the fullest sense out of Julian's slender work.

Spanheim's notes do show broad knowledge and fine judgment (while I must confess that I did not have time to read them all, I was sorely tempted). They also show 314 engravings, most of Roman imperial coins. Two hundred sixty-two of these engravings are in the commentary; in other words, Spanheim considered them essential. Only fifty-two were relegated to the proofs. For Spanheim, as for Guillaume du Choul a century before him, illustrations were an essential part of understanding antiquity. Spanheim used these engravings of coins for four purposes (this is my taxonomy, not his): simple illustration, ironic illustration, and proof of specific claims about the ancient past. I would like to briefly examine each in turn.

Many engravings simply portrayed the emperors and their families, or served to illustrate Spanheim's notes. Noting that many emperors vainly claimed the title "Olympius," Spanheim reproduced a Greek medal of Hadrian that made that claim. Two medals of

Bacchus illustrate Julian’s description of the god as young and handsome.⁵² Elsewhere Spanheim uses medals to show readers what a Roman bed looked like or how victorious armies set up trophies with the arms of their defeated enemies—or even that Caesar was bald beneath his laurel wreath. Such illustrations helped the audience visualize Julian’s words and Spanheim’s commentary, making the past more concrete and real.

But Spanheim also introduced illustrations ironically, to underscore the difference between reality and imperial propaganda. After describing Commodus’s cruelties, Spanheim continued, “after that you can easily judge the truth of the inscription on a Greek medal from Nicaea in Bithynia claiming that ‘with Commodus reigning the world is happy,’ and what you should believe about the medals proclaiming ‘the felicity of the times,’” two examples of which were reproduced in engravings.⁵³ Mark Jones mentions a Dutch pamphleteer who claimed that medals used to tell the truth but now, in the age of Louis XIV, they lie.⁵⁴ Had he met Spanheim, he would have learned that even the noble Romans hired spin doctors to work in their mints. Aware of the limitations of sources and painfully sensitive, after his service in Heidelberg, of the difference between a prince’s power and his pretensions, Spanheim could not take ancient coins at face value when other evidence contradicted them.

When there was no reason to be suspicious of coins, though, Spanheim could use them to prove claims about the past, even when ancient sources disagreed or were tendentious. Did Marcus Aurelius ever use the cognomen “Verus”? The ancients disagreed,

⁵² Spanheim, *Les Césars de Julien* (1683), 12, 30.

⁵³ Spanheim, *Les Césars de Julien* (1683), 87.

⁵⁴ Jones, “Proof stones of history,” 62.

but two Greek medals in the Cabinet du Roy, and another belonging to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, prove that he did.⁵⁵ Vespasian may have been a miser, as the ancient biographers and historians agree, but his coins show the Flavian amphitheater and other signs of his public munificence.⁵⁶ In these cases, coins settled questions that writers had left open; they added to antiquarians' knowledge of the past, even if each coin added very little. Medals verify the resemblance between Socrates and Silenus that Erasmus had made famous in his collection of adages.

Whether offered as illustrations or proofs, however, engraved depictions of coins were only substitutes for the real thing. They were closer to reality than Du Choul's woodcuts; most of Spanheim's engravings appear to be life-sized, though I have not yet had a chance to verify this impression. The copperplate process allowed enough detail for life-sized engravings to be legible, thus increasing the illusion that a reader was contemplating the coins themselves. But of course, readers were doing nothing of the sort. Engravings were easier to interpret than coins, but the engraver, whether working from a drawing or the original, had to render in two dimensions, in sharp lines, the three-dimensional product of a die. Moreover, Spanheim's engravings were perfectly circular—reinforcing a sense that they reproduced commemorative medals, but quite untrue to many of the originals. As with Du Choul, Spanheim had to offer his readers reasons to believe him. And by the late seventeenth century, the stakes were much higher than they had been in the 1550s.

Spanheim's repeated references to personal experience undoubtedly helped, as did his reputation as author of the *De praestantia et usu*. But he also illustrated his *bona fides* by

⁵⁵ Spanheim, *Les Césars de Julien* (1683), 85.

⁵⁶ Spanheim, *Les Césars de Julien* (1683), 67.

refusing to accept as evidence coins he had not seen himself. Discussing Trajan's victories over the Parthians, Spanheim says that he will not base any conclusions on medals "mentioned by other antiquarians and alleged by Scaliger in his commentary on Eusebius, but which are not found today in any known cabinets."⁵⁷ Despite the fact that illustrated volumes of coins had existed for nearly two centuries, the careful scholar could not believe anything he found in them without verifying it. But Spanheim's evocation of cabinets underscores a significant difference between his scholarly ethos and that of Du Choul. The latter had drawn on his own collection or on coins shown or given to him by fellow antiquarians. Spanheim cited princely cabinets. Their authority, the ability of a properly credentialed scholar to visit them and verify for himself what Spanheim had written, underwrote his own—ironically, if Spanheim's *Césars* was truly intended, in part, as a critique of absolutism.

Concluding ruminations

Du Choul, Agustín, and their contemporaries took it for granted that antiquity was valuable, that it deserved their veneration. They cherished their coin collections as so many talismans that could be used to understand the past but that also served as a touchstone, a way of verifying that antiquity *had existed* even if it did no more. Was this also true for Spanheim and his contemporaries? What was their affective relationship to the past?

Spanheim did write that coins were almost alive. But he distanced himself from those who value things only because they are old (*quibus venustia omnia quae vetusta*) and who

⁵⁷ Spanheim, *Les Césars de Julien* (1683), 241, 419.

consider neither their use nor their elegance.⁵⁸ He refused to consider himself an ancient or a modern, or, indeed, to take sides in the dispute. But his remarks on the study of ancient coins reveal a defensiveness that cannot be found in his Renaissance predecessors. His *De praestantia et usu* is divided into three commendations of the study of coins, based on the dignity of the subject, the pleasure it brings, and its usefulness in many domains. The section on use is the longest, but the most self-assured; Spanheim knew what coins could show about the ancient world, and he demonstrates it confidently. The first section, on dignity, is the most troubled. Coins are dignified because they are old, to be sure, but also because of their material, the nobility of the subjects they express—and the “splendor and distinction” of those who study them.⁵⁹ In the sixteenth century, the study of coins had ennobled its students; in the seventeenth, the students ennobled the subject.

Spanheim may have reigned as sovereign in erudition, but his kingdom was troubled. In *De praestantia et usu* was, as Momigliano judged, the foundation of modern numismatics, but it was also an impassioned defense of the study of coins.⁶⁰ In that book, though, by its very nature, Spanheim was preaching to the choir. He hoped that the second edition of his *Césars de Julien* would do a better job of persuading the unconvinced that ancient medals were “les veritables & les plus importantes preuves de mon Auteur & mes Remarques.”⁶¹ The *Journal des Sçavans* approved of the plan and the result, emphasizing both Spanheim’s

⁵⁸ Spanheim, *De praestantia et usu* (1664), 5.

⁵⁹ Spanheim, *De praestantia et usu* (1664), 5-17.

⁶⁰ Arnaldo Momigliano, “Ancient history and the antiquarian.”

⁶¹ Spanheim, *Les Césars de Julien* (1683), sig. ïï2v.

judicious remarks on ancient satire and his fine engravings of medals and cameos.⁶² Whether other readers were equally impressed I have not been able to determine. The work was reprinted several times, into the middle of the eighteenth century; since Spanheim's notes were also translated into Latin and published in Greek editions of Julian, I surmise that there remained a demand among polite readers for his French Julian with its copious notes and illustrations. Pierre Bayle, writing a year after Spanheim's *Césars* was published, thought that such books were entirely in keeping with the taste of the times: "Jamais l'attachement à la science des Médailles, des Inscriptions, des Emblèmes, & en general de toutes sortes d'Antiques n'a été plus grand qu'il l'est dans ce Siecle."⁶³ This interest would continue into the eighteenth century. But already in 1664 and 1683, Spanheim had felt it necessary to defend the study of medals. The *Mémoires de Trévoux* would do the same in 1706, reproaching unnamed "sçavans" who saw no value in a mere thirty-four pages on the medals of the Greek archipelago.⁶⁴ The philosophes' neglect and (in some cases) contempt for *la belle érudition* was already prefigured even as erudition was at its height.

It would be easy to explain the defensiveness of late seventeenth-century antiquaries like Spanheim in terms of the celebrated quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. But recent studies of the quarrel have emphasized both that the *érudits* were on the side of the moderns and that the two camps were not as far apart as their rhetoric sometimes implied.⁶⁵ The element in the quarrel that does seem relevant is the distinction that was made, by the

⁶² *Journal des sçavans, de l'an M. DC. LXXXIII*, vol. 11 (Amsterdam: Chez Pierre le Grand, 1684), 255-259 (Monday, 9 August 1683).

⁶³ *Nouvelles de la République des lettres*, Dec. 1684, 450.

⁶⁴ *Mémoires de Trévoux*, August 1706, 1344.

English Ancients, between the polite defenders of ancient literature and the boorish masters of erudition—between Sir William Temple, the gentleman, and Richard Bentley, the scholar. The ethos of the scholar was at stake—could one be both a scholar and a gentleman?⁶⁶

Another way to approach antiquarians' defensive posture is in terms of that old Horatian commonplace of the *utile dulci*. By the late seventeenth century, antiquity still possessed a grandeur, a grandeur that led Louis XIV to lavishly fund a metallic history of his reign *à l'antique* even as he drained his treasury in the War of the Spanish Succession. But for many, its grandeur was no longer immediate—and grandeur itself was suspect, an attribute of absolutist princes to be sure, but distasteful to many of their subjects.⁶⁷ Was it useful to study the ancients? Was it sweet? In the sixteenth century those questions scarcely needed to be asked. By the late seventeenth century the answer was far from certain. If the past still had the power to kill the living, it might well be through boredom.

⁶⁵ Joseph Levine, *The battle of the books*; Marc Fumaroli, “Les abeilles et les araignées.”

⁶⁶ Cf. Steven Shapin, “‘A scholar and a gentleman’: The problematic identity of the scientific practitioner in early modern England,” *History of Science* 29 (1991): 279-327.

⁶⁷ Here I am beginning to speculate wildly; I am indebted to the perceptive remarks on Corneille, Pascal, and Racine in Paul Bénichou, *Morales du grand siècle*.