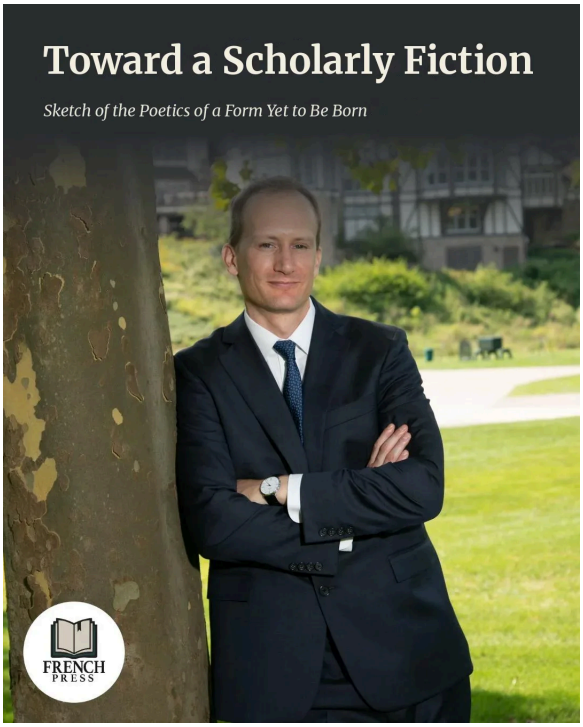
ESSAY

Toward a Scholarly Fiction

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Sketch of the Poetics of a Form Yet to Be Born: A Fiction That Produces Knowledge About the World by Rigorously Articulating Novelistic Invention and Documented Facts



To ask what a *fiction savante* (scholarly fiction) might be is to attempt to define something that does not yet exist: a literary form whose outlines can be recognized within existing works but which has never been described rigorously and which, as a consequence, has never been fully embodied. A strange undertaking, truly, to sketch the poetics of a form that is for the moment hypothetical, of an object yet to be born... And yet it is precisely the tension between what exists and what might come to be, between the works that imperfectly realize the program of scholarly fiction and the program that they incidentally help to form, that constitutes the very driving force of reflection on scholarly fiction. If scholarly fiction does not yet exist in the fullness of its expression and has not been claimed by anyone so far (apart from the author of these lines), already published texts partially approach it, and it is on the basis of these partial advances that its contours can be traced[1].

A scholarly fiction is a narrative work that produces knowledge about the world by rigorously articulating novelistic invention and the shaping of documented facts. This laconic definition implies a founding tension. For the unfolding of fiction and the construction of knowledge seem, a priori, to belong to two radically distinct regimes of discourse. Fiction is the domain of invention, of imagination, of the possible and the conditional: it deploys what did not take place, what might have been, and what could come to pass through multiple forms. Knowledge, for its part, rests on the establishment of facts whose nature and meaning escape the will of the person striving to constitute it; it implies a reverence for what is verifiable and does not depend on authorial whim. How, then, can one conceive of a form that would articulate these two regimes without confusing them? This is precisely the problem that scholarly fiction sets out to solve, and its specificity lies in the answer it proposes, an answer founded on the rigorous articulation of fact and fiction[2].

To understand what scholarly fiction seeks to be, one must first understand what it refuses to embody. Following the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite[3], I will adopt an approach that comes at its object by way of negations, relating the form to be defined to the neighboring forms from which it differs. And the first of these forms, the closest in appearance and therefore the most revealing by contrast, is exofiction[4].

The term *exofiction* was coined by the writer Philippe Vasset in 2011 to designate "a literature that mixes the account of reality as it is with that of the fantasies of *those who make it*[5]." The use of the verb "to mix" in Vasset's founding definition is revealing: from exofiction's birth certificate onward, it signals not an articulation of distinct substances but their transformation into a homogeneous whole, their fusion within a totality where they become indiscernible. Exofiction is thus an aesthetics of confusion: it affects to distance itself from autofiction, which draws on the author's lived experience as the raw material of the narrative, in order to turn toward the biography of real people, but it introduces into the treatment of that biography the fantasies of the author himself, so that the boundary between the subjectivity of the character and that of the writer gradually blurs. Annabel Kim has shown in a landmark study that this supposed break between exofiction and autofiction is more apparent than real: the exofictions by Binet, Carrère, and Haenel on which she draws[6], while effecting a temporal and subjective displacement toward the past and toward a personality distinct from the author's, nonetheless open a space of identification in which author and character merge through a projection of the former's subjectivity into the latter's[7]. Far from being the rigorous other of autofiction, exofiction is a roundabout form of it. To put it differently: exofiction is contraband autofiction.

But what distinguishes exofiction most fundamentally from scholarly fiction is less the absorption of otherness into the self than the specificity of the latter's relation to reality. Exofiction belongs to what Philippe Vilain calls post-realism[8], an aesthetics in which reality is treated as a reservoir of facts that the author's subjectivity is free to recreate, modify, or ignore as necessary according to the demands of rhythm, aesthetics, or the symbolic dimension the work wishes to explore. Printed on the back cover of *Windows on the World*[9], Frédéric Beigbeder's formula expresses, with a frankness that borders on provocation, the logic inherent in post-realism: "The only way to know what happened in the restaurant on the 107th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center, on September 11, 2001, between 8:30 and 10:29, is to invent it."

Here, fiction is not a provisional supplement to incomplete knowledge, carefully flagged as such: it is designated as the only conceivable access to reality and takes the place of documentation and of the analysis of testimonies and facts.

It is precisely on the fault line between fact and invention that scholarly fiction is built. Not that it refuses invention on principle (quite the contrary: invention is constitutive of it); rather, what it opposes is the confusion of invention and fact, the erasure of the ontological boundary that separates them[10]. Where exofiction fabricates narrative out of history without bothering to respect the documented facts it integrates into its narrative logic, scholarly fiction subscribes to a pact whose fundamental article is never to alter the data established by historical or documentary work. This pact does not imply the effacement of fiction before knowledge: it means that fiction signals where it begins. Such is the capital distinction separating scholarly fiction from exofiction: not the absence of fiction in the one and its presence in the other, but the presence in the former of a rigorously maintained boundary between what belongs to fact and what belongs to invention.

The central metaphor on which to found a poetics of scholarly fiction is that of the interstice. The interstice, in the literal sense, is the space that lies between two objects; derived from the Latin *interstare*, the term designates what is found between. If scholarly fiction embodies a writing of the interstice, it is because it reserves the practice of invention for filling the gaps that remain between available knowledge. It does not appropriate facts in order to transform them, to proclaim the sovereignty of the creative imagination over them, as exofiction does; it occupies the silences that these facts leave between them. This gesture (naming invention, circumscribing it, flagging it as such in order to preserve the truth-value of what frames it) contributes to the characteristic approach of scholarly fiction and embodies the condition of possibility for an articulation between fact and fiction.

The gaps that scholarly fiction is called upon to fill fall into two categories, distinguishable by their ontological status. On the one hand, there are gaps that might be called definitive: lacunae in knowledge that nothing will ever be able to fill, because they correspond to fleeting, interior realities that left no trace capable of being documented. The inner life of a real person, what he felt or thought at a precise moment of his existence, belongs to this category. Unless the individual concerned recorded this subjective state somewhere, any intrusion into his psyche falls under what might be called an unfalsifiable fictional speculation: a conjecture that no future discovery could either invalidate or confirm[11]. The presence of these subjective contents within scholarly fiction constitutes one of the portions of invention that it permits itself, by delimiting it, in its narrative shaping of the past. On the other hand, there are provisional gaps: voids in available knowledge that, at least in theory, can be filled by the future rediscovery of a testimony or document. These gaps allow the intrusion of what I will call falsifiable fictional speculations: suppositions about absent facts that might conceivably be contradicted one day by a new discovery.

This typology of fictional speculations makes it possible to measure the extent of the territory proper to scholarly fiction and to understand why the very notion of invention takes on a different meaning there from the one it has within exofiction. When the author of a scholarly fiction attributes thoughts to a real person (as is the case in *La Guerre des os*[12], where Charles Marsh, for example, expresses a fleeting weariness

during his long rivalry with Edward Cope), he is not yielding to a sovereign arbitrariness, to that murky pleasure that Sartre describes in *Les Mots*[13] when he gouges out Daisy's eyes in order to experience the vertigo of authorial omnipotence. He elaborates these psychological contents so that they are compatible with the available knowledge about the person in question. Invention, here, is not caprice: it is pertinent conjecture, grounded hypothesis.

However rigorous it may be, though, a conjecture is not a fact. And this is why scholarly fiction cannot be content to practice the writing of the interstice without flagging its occurrences. The role of fictional signals consists precisely in marking the moments when invention supplements available knowledge, in allowing the reader to identify the passage from a regime of discourse founded on established facts to another in which speculation takes the upper hand. These signals can take various forms: adoption of the markers of academic discourse (such as quotation marks or footnotes), direct comments by the narrator on the truth-value of the passages he introduces, remarks by the author about the gaps he is about to fill, and so on. In *Armures*[14], for example, Stéphanie Hochet indicates by means of a note that she allows herself to lend characteristics of her own mother to Isabeau d'Arc, explicitly acknowledging that she "finds herself facing a void" in the historiography, which she fills by drawing on intimate materials. The function of this authorial gesture is twofold: it signals the intrusion of fiction into the narrative and, in so doing, indirectly reaffirms the documentary anchoring of what precedes and did not require such clarification. Thus the flagging of invention is, paradoxically, an implicit reminder of the factual value of the rest of the work. Elsewhere, a larger historiographical void is exploited by the author: *William*[15] imagines what happened to Shakespeare between 1585 and 1592, years about which his biographers have no documents, so that a new zone of absence is invested by the work of fiction, which finds in it its reason for being and its origin.

The distinction between scholarly fiction and non-fiction sheds additional light on the specificity of the former. The fruit of fertile crossings between narrative, autobiography, and investigative journalism, non-fiction presupposes a meticulous work of verification, the result of which is that only those textual passages are retained in which facts and reported statements can be attributed to reliable sources, while everything that belongs to invention is removed[16]. Scholarly fiction, by contrast, permits itself precisely the speculations that non-fiction forbids itself (such as intruding into the psyche of a real person or reconstructing undocumented circumstances), on the condition, however, that they be flagged as such. It thus occupies a territory of its own: it retains neither the absolute rigor of non-fiction, which excludes all undocumented speculation, nor the sovereign freedom of exofiction, which frees itself from the boundary between fact and fiction. Between these two forms, scholarly fiction draws a space where invention is legitimate provided it is delimited.

What is at stake in this delimitation goes beyond a mere question of poetics: it is the problem of literature's relation to truth that is raised. Exofiction participates in what might be called a new era of suspicion: not the suspicion that the reader harbors toward the overly smooth characters of the realist novel of which Nathalie Sarraute spoke[17], but the uncertainty that weighs on his mind as soon as he wonders about the value of the knowledge he believes he is acquiring by way of a narrative. Is he truly learning something about the historical character or event in question, or has what the narrative presents to him as truth been subjected to fictional reinvention? No one, in exofiction, has committed to providing him with the means to answer this

question: the reading pact is absent or deliberately ambiguous. The declared practice of confusing fact and fiction thus contributes to the broader offensive that the concept of truth is undergoing in our time, to that supposed reversibility of statements whose consequences are insidious for the proper functioning of democratic societies.

Scholarly fiction, by contrast, is built on the ontological difference between fact and fiction, on their irreducibility to one another[18]. When it takes hold of a historical event, it relies on in-depth research and forbids itself from modifying the documented facts it shares. When it speaks of the present, it commits itself to an effort of documentation and inquiry that allows it to delimit precisely what belongs to speculation and what belongs to demonstrable knowledge. The deontology of scholarly fiction requires the inclusion of a bibliography (in keeping with the academic works from which it is partly built) in order to acknowledge the debts it has incurred toward the historians and researchers whose work it has set into narrative. The paratext is there to attribute to historians the interpretations woven into the thread of the narration and to allow the reader to distinguish between borrowed knowledge and knowledge produced by the author's own research.

Nevertheless, scholarly fiction is more than an exercise in synthesizing knowledge constituted by others. Fiction itself is not the antonym of truth: there is indeed a truth inherent in the exercise of fiction, a truth of a different order from that of documentable facts. When a literary work recreates the subjective perspective of a historical figure by plunging into his interiority, imputing to him thoughts or words that it cannot be certain were truly his, it does more than fill a void by means of gratuitous speculation. It employs the resources proper to it (the enunciative techniques of the novel, narrative polyphony, the plunge into the psychological mechanisms of characters...) in order to give the reader an intimate understanding of varied territories of human experience that would otherwise be closed to him. Scholarly fiction also offers narrativizations of historical material that convey alternative ways of thinking about causality, of illuminating the chains of events of the past by means of multiple narrative lines. Maintaining the tension between what it borrows from the rigor of the humanities and what it inherits from the novelistic tradition, scholarly fiction produces, by the paths of literature, knowledge about the world as it is, as it was, or as it might be.

Philippe Vilain's proposal in *La Passion d'Orphée*[19] to establish a formal distinction between literary literature and commercial literature testifies to an aspiration to bring order to the superabundance of contemporary narrative production; scholarly fiction, for its part, does not induce an aesthetic hierarchy but a distinct relation to truth, which is perhaps an even more fundamental way of distinguishing between works. It calls, in short, for the creation of a new architextual term which, against the hegemony of the novel, will signal on book covers the specificity of this narrative form by underscoring the pact the author subscribes to with the reader. The present text is meant as a birth certificate: a form of proclamation so that works to come will deliberately illustrate the poetics of scholarly fiction, a poetics that they will work from within, bringing it enrichments and modifications.

At a time when the growing confusion of fact and fiction threatens the foundations of the democratic space, scholarly fiction responds with a twofold commitment: never to betray the boundary that separates invention from fact, to name the one the better to honor the other; and to show by example that literature is

not condemned to choose between the freedom of the imagination and the rigorous constitution of knowledge. Conversely, because it claims the capacity of narrative invention to function as an instrument of knowledge, it offers an alternative to those academic productions which, being essentially analytical and discursive, are the ones best imitated by the outputs of artificial intelligence. By drawing a space of creation where subjective expression in invention is in dialogue with the work of documentation in the service of facts, might scholarly fiction open a new path for literary creation while at the same time indicating a possible direction for future academic productions? Irreducible to the standardized outputs of large language models, these would manifest the reverberation within oneself of the existence of the other, the humanity of their author in dialogue with that of their object.

Benjamin Hoffmann (The Ohio State University), June 2026

[1] The first written mention of the expression *fiction savante* appears in Nicolas Idier's article on *La Guerre des os* (Denoël, 2026), in reference to a conversation held on January 27, 2026, at the Maison de la poésie: N. Idier, "Lettre à Benjamin Hoffmann," *Commentaire*, March 2026. The reflection I offer here results from my work as a novelist.

[2] On the question of the boundary between fact and fiction and its theoretical stakes, see F. Lavocat, *Fait et fiction. Pour une frontière*, Paris, Seuil, coll. "Poétique," 2016.

[3] Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology* V, in *Œuvres complètes*, trans. M. de Gandillac, Paris, Aubier, 1943, pp. 179-180: "[The cause of all things] is neither soul nor intellect; it has neither imagination, nor opinion, nor reason, nor intelligence; it is neither reason nor thought; it can be neither spoken nor thought."

[4] On exofiction, see in particular C. Ruhe, "L''exofiction' entre non-fiction, contrainte et exemplarité," in *Territoires de la non-fiction : cartographie d'un genre émergent*, ed. A. Gefen, Leiden, Brill Rodopi, 2020, pp. 82-106; and L. Demanze, "Dernières nouvelles de l'exofictif : Autour des Journaux intimes de Philippe Vasset," *Littérature*, no. 203, 2021, pp. 26-37.

[5] Ph. Vasset, "L'Exofictif," *Vacarme*, no. 54, February 19, 2011, p. 29. See also F. Roussel, "De passage secret," *Libération*, no. 10039, August 23, 2013. Emphasis mine.

[6] Annabel Kim's argument relies principally on the following works: L. Binet, *HHhH*, Paris, Grasset, 2010; Y. Haenel, *Jan Karski*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009; E. Carrère, *Limonov*, Paris, P.O.L., 2011.

[7] A. Kim, "Exofiction as Autofiction: Contemporary French Fiction's Identity Crisis," *New Literary History*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2024, pp. 175-194.

[8] Ph. Vilain, *La Passion d'Orphée*, Paris, Gallimard, 2020. See also Ph. Vilain, *La Littérature sans idéal*, Paris, Grasset, 2016, p. 48, where Vilain observes of post-realism: "if, at first, the real fact is collected, recorded, and described as it imposes itself on immediate consciousness, in a second phase, this first, meaningful description finds itself in competition with the meanings that the author assigns to it."

[9] F. Beigbeder, *Windows on the World*, Paris, Grasset, 2003, back cover. See also L. Lang, *Onze septembre mon amour*, Paris, Stock, 2003, another founding text of post-realism according to Vilain.

[10] On this question, see A. Kim, art. cit., p. 182. Exofiction tends to produce "a confusion between authorial subjectivity and that of the character" that amounts to a "radical panfictionalism" in which the limits of invention and reality fade (Lavocat, op. cit., p. 45).

[11] I borrow the concept of "falsifiability" from Popper's theory. On this question, see K. R. Popper, *La Logique de la découverte scientifique*, Paris, Payot, 1973, and Y. Cabot, "La théorie poppérienne de la confirmation scientifique," *Philosophia Scientiæ*, 28-1, pp. 133-153.

[12] B. Hoffmann, *La Guerre des os*, Paris, Denoël, 2026. The passage cited is found on pp. 129-130: "Sometimes he happens to think that his passion for bones is perhaps excessive, that he makes far too much room for Edward, who has taken up residence in his skull [...]."

[13] "What was stopping me from gouging out Daisy's eyes? Dying of fear, I answered myself: nothing. And I gouged them out as I would have torn the wings off a fly." (J.-P. Sartre, *Les Mots*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, p. 139).

[14] S. Hochet, *Armures*, Paris, Rivages, 2025, p. 27. The note reads: "The author allows herself to lend characteristics of her own mother to Isabeau d'Arc. Knowing little about Jeanne's mother, finding herself facing a void, the author allowed herself to spread a little of her ancestor's saintliness over the profile of this fifteenth-century woman."

[15] S. Hochet, *William*, Paris, Rivages, 2023. For other examples of works exploiting biographical gray areas as fictional material, see the various books devoted to the mysterious disappearance of Agatha Christie in 1926: B. Kernel, *Agatha Christie, le chapitre disparu*, Paris, Flammarion, 2016; M. Benedict, *The Mystery of Mrs. Christie*, Naperville, Sourcebooks Landmark, 2020; N. de Gramont, *L'Affaire Agatha Christie*, Paris, Cherche midi, 2023.

[16] On this subject, see C. Milanesi and D. Barrientos Tecún, "Territoires de la non-fiction. Introduction," *Cahiers d'études romanes*, no. 38, 2019, pp. 7-17.

[17] N. Sarraute, *L'Ère du soupçon. Essais sur le roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987, p. 7, where the author describes the reader's suspicion toward novelistic characters who are "too clear-cut, too coherent, too well defined."

[18] On this question, see here again F. Lavocat, *Fait et fiction. Pour une frontière*, op. cit., the reference work on the ontological difference between fact and fiction and its ethical and political stakes.

[19] Ph. Vilain, *La Passion d'Orphée*, Paris, Gallimard, 2020.

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